5280
THE DENVER MAGAZINE

TOP OF THE TOWN

From Burgers To Bookstores, We Set Our Sights On Denver's Hottest Spots

PLUS

ONE OF COLORADO'S MOST BEAUTIFUL—AND REMOTE—LANDSCAPES
PAGE 30

DIFFERENT HOME, SAME SOUL: WELTON STREET CAFE IS BACK IN FIVE POINTS
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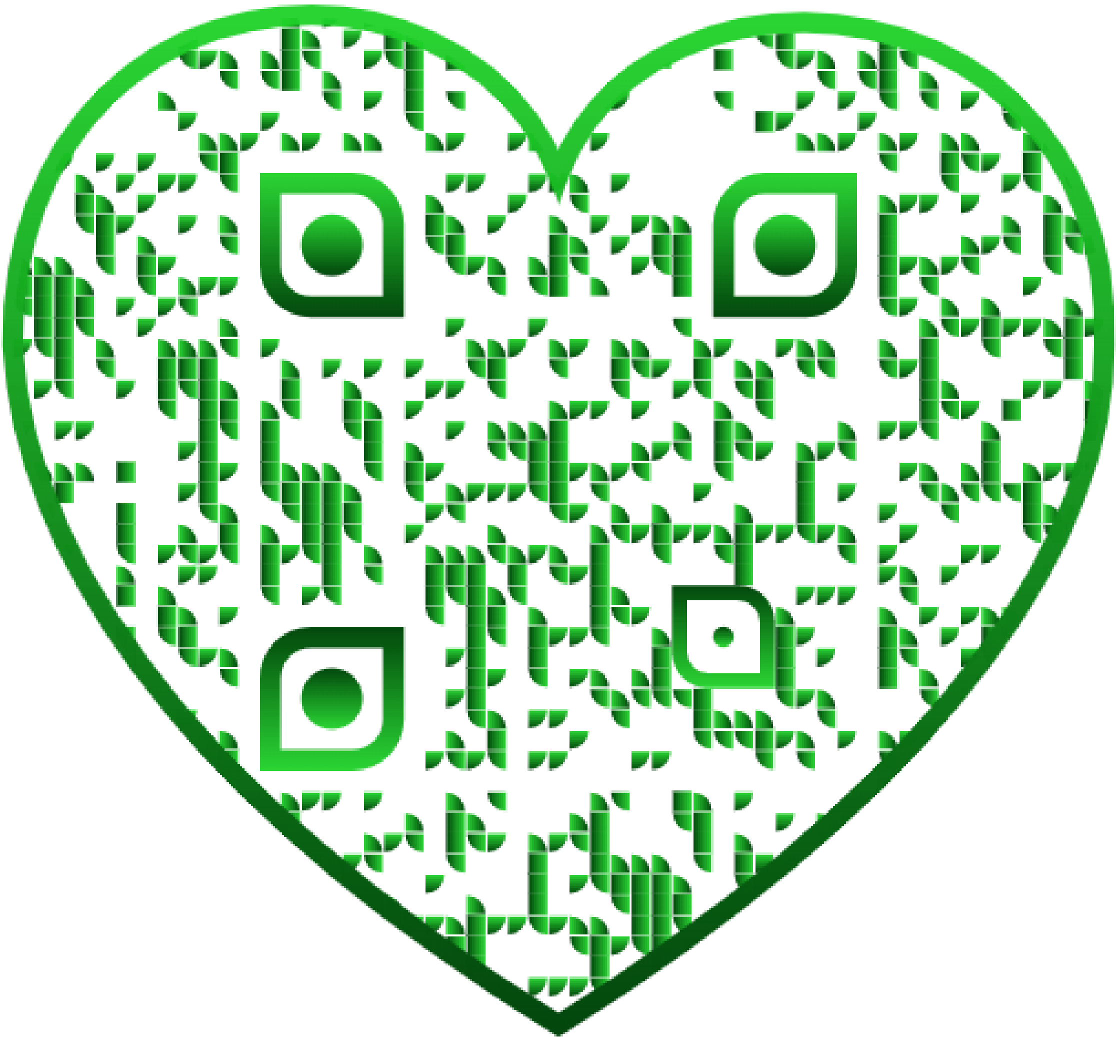

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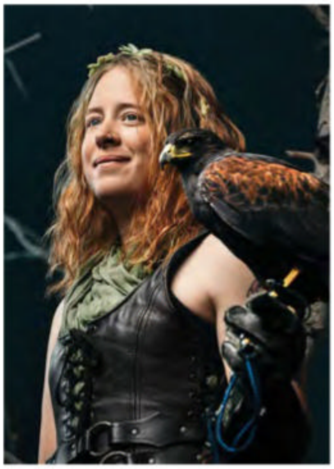

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Photograph by Sarah Banks
Stellar Jay at the Populus Hotel

Clockwise from top left: Adventure Photo/Getty Images; Paul Miller; Cavan Images/Alamy Stock Photo; Sarah Banks

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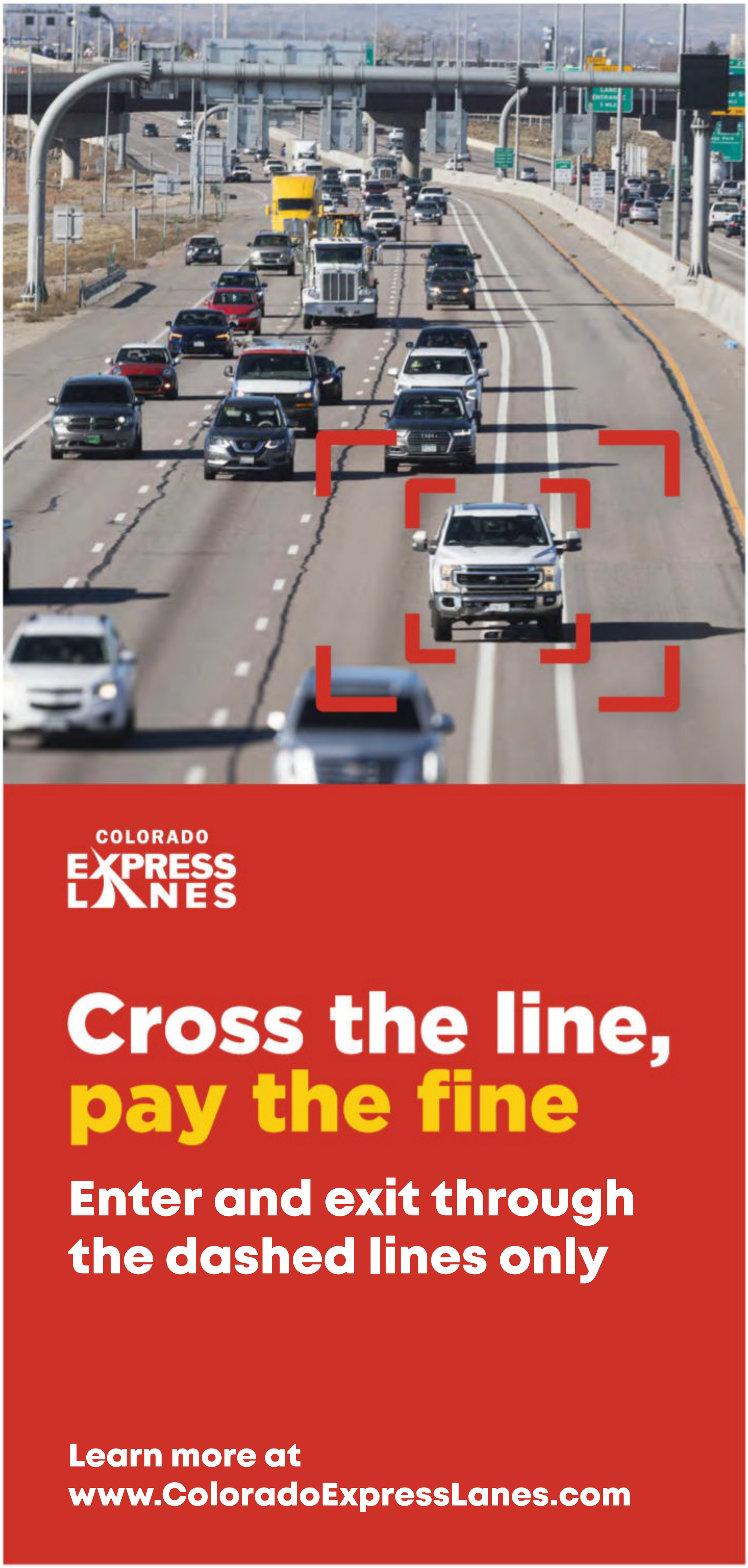
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SCAN FOR TICKETS

Picking Winners

^ Necklaces from this year's top local jewelry designer, Boulder's Karen Okada

I got my first Top of the Town assignment in 2010. A fresh college graduate, recent Colorado transplant, and overeager *5280* intern, I was to be responsible for choosing the very best eyebrow wax in the city.

I panicked. I was a lifelong tweezer with a modest expense budget and only a couple of months till my deadline. What makes one hair-removal service markedly better than another, anyway? If the first two I got were bad, would I have any eyebrows left for a third? And who was *I* to dole out *5280*'s prestigious annual designation, which I'd seen businesses all over town proudly displaying on plaques and window decals?

Then, I calmed down and started doing what journalists do: research. I asked well-groomed friends and colleagues where they went. I read up on the latest industry trends and innovations. I scanned Yelp reviews. With my search narrowed, I booked a couple of appointments and prepared to sacrifice my mug for the good of our readers. I only momentarily freaked out when a chatty esthetician asked what I did for work. (Whenever possible, we do our reporting anonymously to get a true experience.)

In the 15 years since, I've gotten better at my cover stories: I've removed my wedding ring to pose as a bride-to-be trying on gowns, lied about being a vegan, pretended to be an aspiring yoga instructor to justify asking way too many questions post-class, and invented an infant niece to shop for. Although I still feel the weight of my selections every year, the anxiety no longer overwhelms the sheer fun of going out, falling in love with awesome spots run by caring, hard-working locals, and then getting to celebrate them in these pages and at our truly fabulous Top of the Town party (July 17 in Cherry Creek North; tickets are available at 5280scene.com).

This year's list starts on page 38. We no longer have an eyebrow wax category, but our staffers and trusted freelancers bellied up to bars, scoured thrift stores, and dragged their kids to playgrounds to bring you our 30 editors' choice selections, which complement all 82 readers' choice winners. I hope you find something new to try and get as much joy out of your experience as we did. And, should you be in need of eyebrow services, I'm pleased to tell you my July 2010 pick—Brows on Upper 15th in LoHi—is still waxing, threading, and tinting with the best of them.

JESSICA LaRUSSO
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ALAN PRENDERGAST
Freelance Writer

Politics, crime, the environment: As a longtime staff writer and current senior contributor for alt-weekly *Westword*, Alan Prendergast has reported on many of Denver's power players. So when we called to ask if he knew about Mountain States Legal Foundation, a niche nonprofit law firm that champions conservative causes, we weren't surprised that he said yes. In "Right Place, Right Time" (page 66), he asks if President Donald Trump's second term will elevate the firm—or make it obsolete. **"I wanted to do a story that delved into the rich history of the group without demonizing or pontificating,"** Prendergast says. If he could do one thing differently? "I wish I could have spent time with the attorneys outside the office," he says. "Do they hike in national parks or fish in government-managed rivers? How do they reconcile that with their work on behalf of companies that want to drill for oil and gas in wilderness areas and declare open season on endangered species?"

CORRECTION

In June's "The Butterfly Effect," we incorrectly reported that Sumatran farmers raise butterflies that are then sold to the Butterfly Pavilion. In fact, staff train community members in Sumatra to help raise butterflies at a Butterfly Pavilion–owned farm. The organization sells those butterflies to other houses. We regret the error.

From top: Sarah Banks; Anthony Camera/Courtesy of Alan Prendergast

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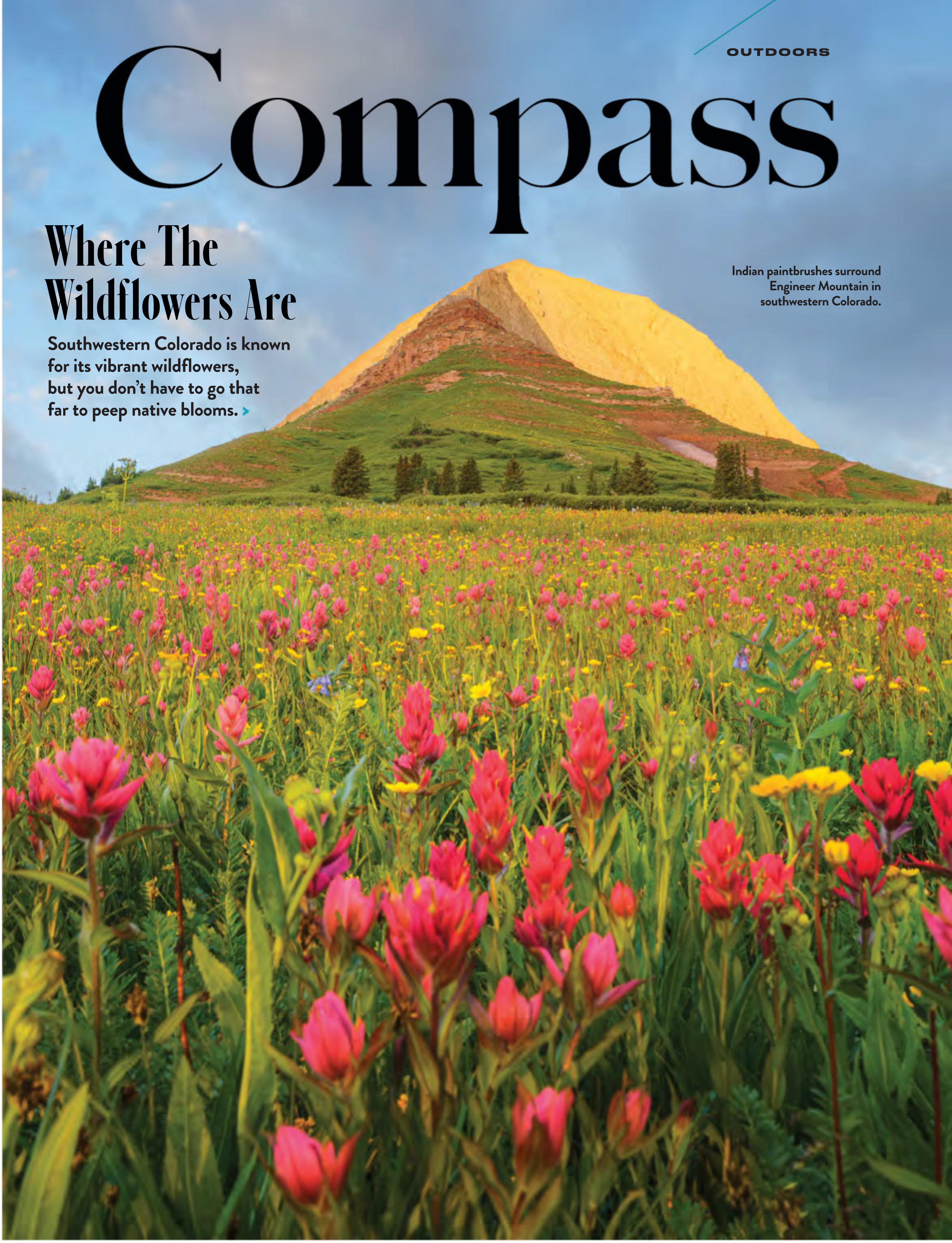
Where The Wildflowers Are

Southwestern Colorado is known for its vibrant wildflowers, but you don't have to go that far to peep native blooms. >

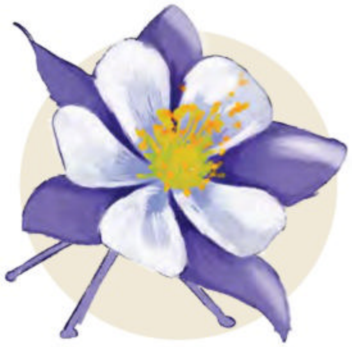


Indian paintbrushes surround Engineer Mountain in southwestern Colorado.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON J. HATFIELD

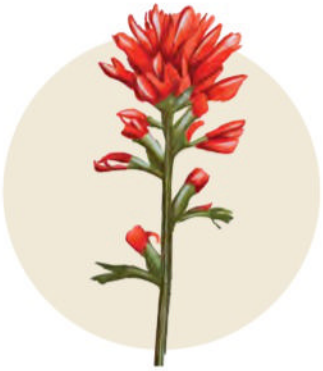
CONTINUED

They don't call us Colorful Colorado for nothing. From May through early August, the Centennial State is painted in pastel petals as native wildflowers bloom, with the peak for high-altitude species typically coming early this month. Nowhere is the show more spectacular than in Crested Butte, which will host its annual wildflower festival (featuring everything from guided hikes to photography classes) July 11 to 20. But if you don't want to drive four-plus hours to enjoy nature's pyrotechnics, a slew of beauties blossom right here on the Front Range. To help you find them, we asked Maggie Gaddis, executive director of the Colorado Native Plant Society, where to go looking for lupines, Indian paintbrushes, and more, all within a two-hour drive of Denver. –**JESSICA GILES**



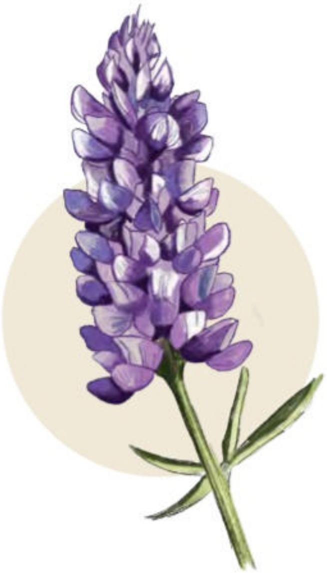
1. Rocky Mountain Columbine

To discover our state flower, cue up our state song: "The cool summer breeze in the evergreen trees softly sings where the columbines grow." This bloom—revered for its five icy white petals framed by just as many purplish, starlike spurs—thrives in moist meadows on mountainous slopes near evergreen trees. Those three ingredients are in abundance at Lost Lake in Nederland. The moderate **Hessie Trail** is just over four miles (out and back) and delivers you to the alpine lake. On the way, you'll hike past fields of columbines and, perhaps, a moose or two (the animals love this area almost as much as the flowers do).



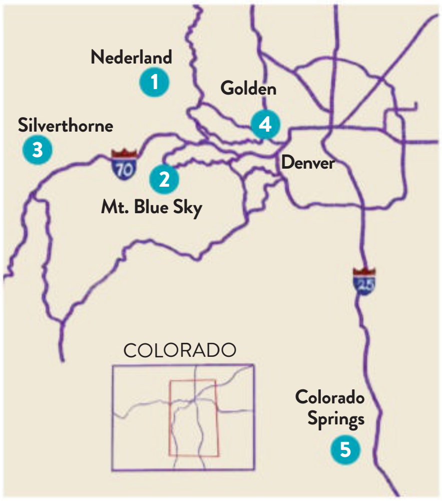
2. Indian Paintbrush

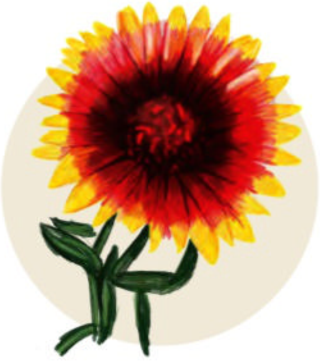
This species is named for its paintbrushlike bracts (small leaves often mistaken for petals) that look like they've been dipped in vibrant colors. The common peach variety blooms at lower elevations, but head to the Mt. Evans Wilderness to find the rarer pink and white versions, which grow only at higher elevations. The **Chicago Lakes Trail** gains more than 2,100 feet over nine miles, but you'll be rewarded with vast meadows replete with purple Colorado tansyasters, yellow alpine avens, and magenta Indian paintbrushes.



3. Silvery Lupine

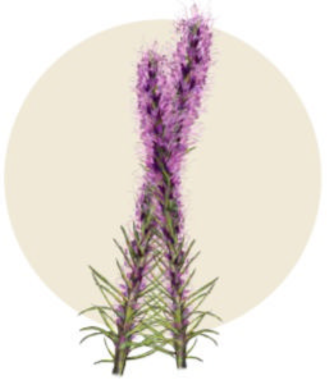
These flashy flowers are all born Leos: They practically beg for attention, with their periwinkle petals shooting straight up to the sky in long clusters. Like most wildflowers, they also crave sunshine, which is why the west-facing slope of the roughly five-mile **Acorn Creek Loop** in Silverthorne is littered with lupines. But don't get so obsessed with the flowers that you forget to look up. The trail meanders 1,000 feet skyward on the lower western flank of Ptarmigan Peak and offers sweeping views of the Gore Range.





4. Blanket Flower

With its red center fading into yellow petals, the common gaillardia proves that ombré isn't just a passing trend. And there's no need to head for the hills to enjoy these daisy lookalikes. Blanket flowers prefer lower-elevation habitats like prairies and ponderosa pine forests. That includes the landscape surrounding **Wrigley's Trail** in Golden, a one-mile, bike-friendly path that stretches from Wrigley's Chicago Bar and Grill to the Hogback Park-n-Ride lot off I-70 at U.S. 40. You'll also peep penstemons: hardy perennials with more than 60 species native to Colorado.



5. Dotted Gayfeather

If you miss the lupines and the columbines this year, fear not: You still have a chance to catch dotted gayfeathers at their prime. The late-blooming buds don't show off their fuzzy-looking lavender flowers until August, when their Seussian plumage is on full display at Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs. See the purple wildflowers pop against the orange sandstone on the popular **Ute Trail**, an easy one-mile loop through the center of the park.

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^ A beehive-themed playground was installed on 16th Street in 2024.

Sweeter Sixteenth

The 16th Street renovation is nearing completion. Now, its reputation needs a makeover.

In 2021, a man wielding a machete walked into Sportsfan, a sports apparel store, on 16th Street. He didn't attack anyone, but he did steal a hat and a jersey. On multiple occasions, groups of thieves smashed the store's windows and swiped thousands of dollars of merchandise. Derek Friedman, who owns three shops on the mall (two Sportsfans and a Sock Em' Sock Emporium), had seen enough. He implemented a one percent "Crime Spike Fee" on all transactions to subsidize his losses and sometimes worried that his businesses wouldn't survive.

Friedman began to notice a decline in public safety downtown in 2019, when property crime in LoDo (aka the Union Station neighborhood) increased nearly 60 percent compared with the year before. Overall crime (including violent crime and drug-related offenses) continued to escalate during the pandemic, rising 33 percent from 2019 to 2022.

That same year, the city launched a $175 million renovation of what was then called the 16th Street Mall. The project repaved deteriorating granite, added trees, and created wider sidewalks along the entirety of the 1.2-mile, pedestrian-only thoroughfare. The Downtown Denver Partnership built a 30-foot-tall play structure resembling a bird's nest in an aspen tree between Glenarm Place and Tremont Place. Then-Mayor Michael Hancock said in a press release that the project would move Denver "from rescue to recovery."

Work on 10 of its 13 blocks has been completed, with the final three wrapping up this fall. To encourage people to check out the revamped road, the Denver City Council allocated $1.9 million to the partnership, which plans to open additional play areas, fund public art, and organize musical performances. "We're using this to invite people back to 16th and remind them what they love about this space," says Kate Barton, the DDP's chief of external affairs. Already, the organization has agreed to pay selected buskers to perform along the drag during the summer.

But some worry that making 16th Street more entertaining doesn't necessarily mean it will be safer. In January, a man stabbed four people along the street, killing two of them. Though the number of crimes reported in LoDo reached a five-year low in 2024, the attack further damaged the street's reputation. In April, Mayor Mike Johnston announced the creation of a 10-person police unit to patrol the downtown core on bike, foot, and motorcycle. The DDP is using some of its City Council cash to hire five unarmed private security guards to assist law enforcement. And the city is set to open a police kiosk at Arapahoe Street where passersby can report safety concerns. "We could have all the art activations in the world," Barton says, "but if it doesn't feel safe, people won't come."

The city's efforts seem to be working, at least in Friedman's opinion: He finally got rid of his Crime Spike Fee in April. But while he's excited about the potential revitalization of 16th Street (the city rebranded to drop the "mall" part of its moniker in May), he just hopes the focus on crime prevention is permanent. "It's been five years since things went downhill," Friedman says. "You can't fix all of that in a few months. I hope that the city's investment strategy is long term." —BARBARA O'NEIL

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3 WAYS TO ENJOY 16TH STREET THIS SUMMER

1 Skyline Beer Garden
The seasonal outdoor hangout at 16th and Arapahoe opened last month and offers live music, local art, and craft beer through September. Stop by every Saturday night for bites from rotating food trucks.

2 Daybreaker
Daybreaker hosts morning dance parties that skip the substances but keep the energy high with live DJ sets. Feel the vibes on August 16 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Union Station (starting at $29).

3 Upper DownTunes
This free music series from the DDP brings live performers to the intersection of 16th and Welton every weekday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Thursday and Friday from 4 to 7 p.m.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH BANKS

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Sky Quackenbush and Zeus, a Harris hawk

A Bird In Hand

At the Colorado Renaissance Festival each summer, crowds flock to watch Sky Quackenbush lead daily bird-of-prey shows starring some of the planet's most charismatic avian species: majestic bald eagles, graceful peregrine falcons, and the spooky, ghost-faced barn owl. But she's especially fond of a bird that most people overlook, if not downright detest. "Vultures are some of our most social birds," says Quackenbush, an animal care specialist for Nature's Educators, a Florence-based nonprofit. "They're very intelligent, and they prevent the spread of disease. Their stomach acid is comparable to battery acid, so it kills everything." Of the 33 rescue birds in the group's flock, one of Quackenbush's favorites is Sashimi, a turkey vulture who was found as a chick in a cardboard box in St. Louis. "To earn a bird's trust is unique," she says. Quackenbush, 26, and her birds are one of the most popular attractions at the renaissance festival, which runs June 14 through August 3 in Larkspur. She and her colleagues also regularly host performances at the Royal Gorge Bridge & Park, near Cañon City. To prepare for the shows, each animal undergoes dozens of hours of training, with handlers using positive reinforcement in the form of tasty rat, quail, and rabbit treats. Attendees are advised not to bring food or small pets to the show (dare to snack on a turkey leg, and it may be snatched from your hands). "It's always the birds' choice to fly or not that day, so you never know exactly how things will go," says Quackenbush, who's worked at Nature's Educators since 2018. And no, Sky Quackenbush is not her given name, and she did not come up with the nom de guerre to suit her profession. "It was just an online username I used to use," she laughs. "But it fits." –**ROSE CAHALAN**

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL MILLER

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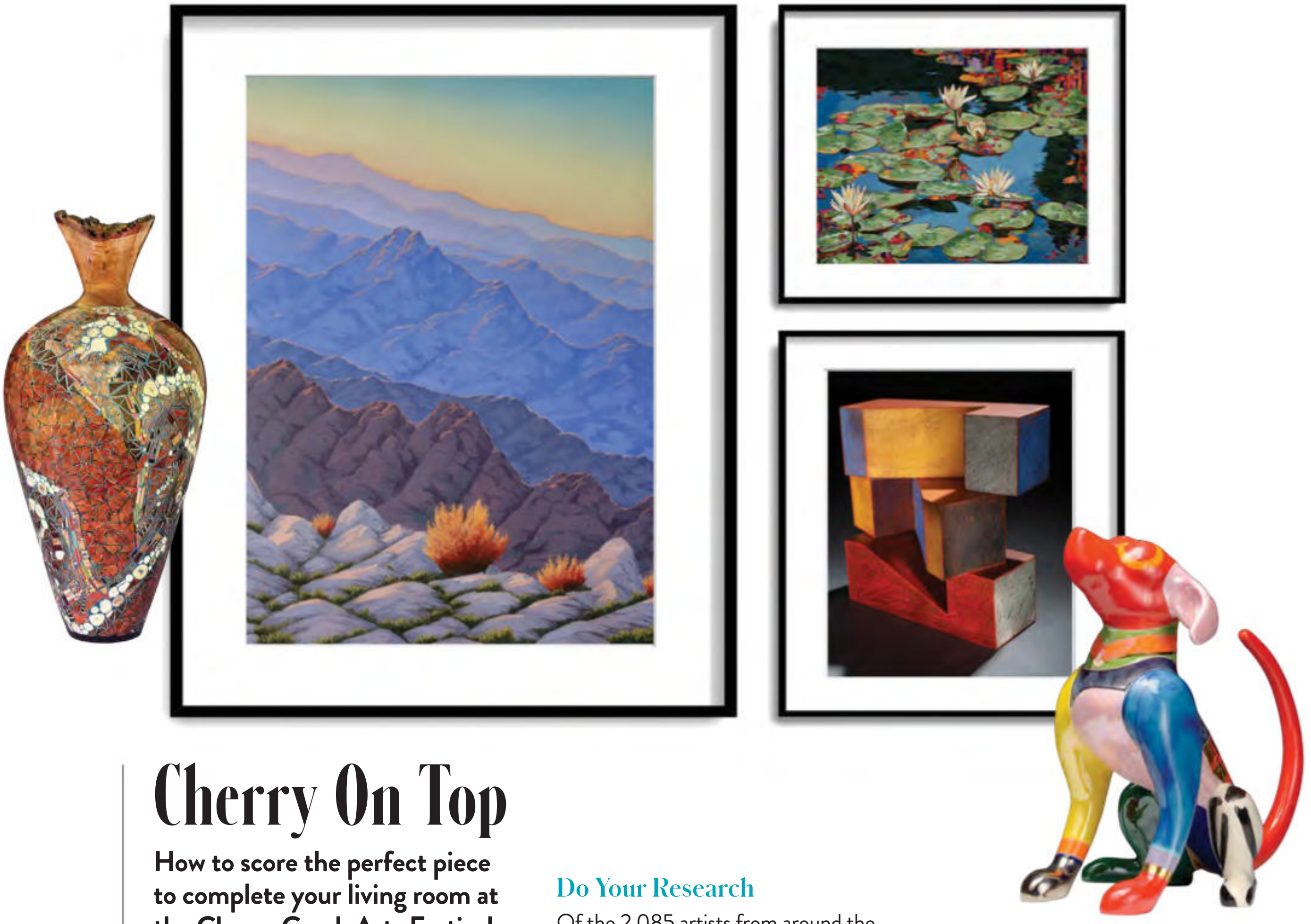

Cherry On Top

How to score the perfect piece to complete your living room at the Cherry Creek Arts Festival.

For CherryArts, the nonprofit that produces the Cherry Creek Arts Festival (July 4 to 6), turning the curious into collectors is the mission. That begins with programming that serves around 40,000 Colorado students annually. "We look at it as a full-circle deal," says Tara Brickell, the executive director and CEO of CherryArts, which runs a mobile gallery, distributes art supply kits, and raises money that allows students to purchase pieces for their schools at the festival. "We're out in the community, trying to get art to the masses and create new art appreciators and artists, to continue what we do at the big event." But even if your classroom days are behind you, it's not too late to become a connoisseur—at least when it comes to your own decor. Which is why we asked Brickell to share her top tips for bringing a masterpiece home from the three-day shindig. –**JESSICA LARUSSO**

***Clockwise from left*: This year's festival artists include Nicholas Barnes ("In the Stream"), Terry Sauve ("Mountain Overlook at Sunset"), David Palmer ("Show Me the Monet #8"), Larry Fox ("Block"), and Scott Causey ("Sitting Dog").**

Do Your Research

Of the 2,085 artists from around the world who applied this year, 260 were selected by a five-person jury to showcase their original, handcrafted works in 13 mediums. At cherryarts.org, you can filter the creators by the type of art you're interested in, from ceramics to painting to fiber to metalworks. "There is art available at so many different price points, it can be accessible even with a modest budget," Brickell says, adding that many artists offer payment plans. Check out the festival's five grant-supported emerging artists—four of whom, including ceramic artist Eunjoo Kang of Mead, are from Colorado—to say you knew the up-and-comers when.

Make The Rounds

Especially on day one, Brickell says, the early bird gets the art: "Artists know that even though the show starts at 10 a.m., a lot of folks come early," so they get out and man their booths in the cool morning hours. Use the festival map on CherryArts' site to plan your route, and bring measurements and photos of the space in your home—a bookshelf, a wall, a corner table—you're hoping to fill. "Talk with the artists about what might fit best there," Brickell says, including commissioned works. "Making that connection and learning about how and why they created what they did can really solidify your decision."

Choose Wisely

After you've visited a few artists, take a break to enjoy the festival's other attractions, including a block of interactive kids' activities (such as making Maori necklaces) and cultural performances (Cleo Parker Robinson Dance will perform on July 5), a main stage with live music, and dozens of food and drink vendors. But pay attention to which artworks your mind returns to. "That's probably a sign it's something that's meant to be in your home," Brickell says.

If You Go: The Cherry Creek Arts Festival takes over Second Avenue, from Clayton Street to Adams Street, in Cherry Creek North from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Friday, July 4, and Saturday, July 5, and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday, July 6. Entry is free. Tickets for the opening night gala (and sneak peeks at the work of 40 artists) from 5 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, July 3, start at $110.

Clockwise from left: Courtesy of Nicholas Barnes; Courtesy of Terry Sauve; Courtesy of David Palmer; Courtesy of Larry Fox; Courtesy of Scott Causey; Getty Images (frames)

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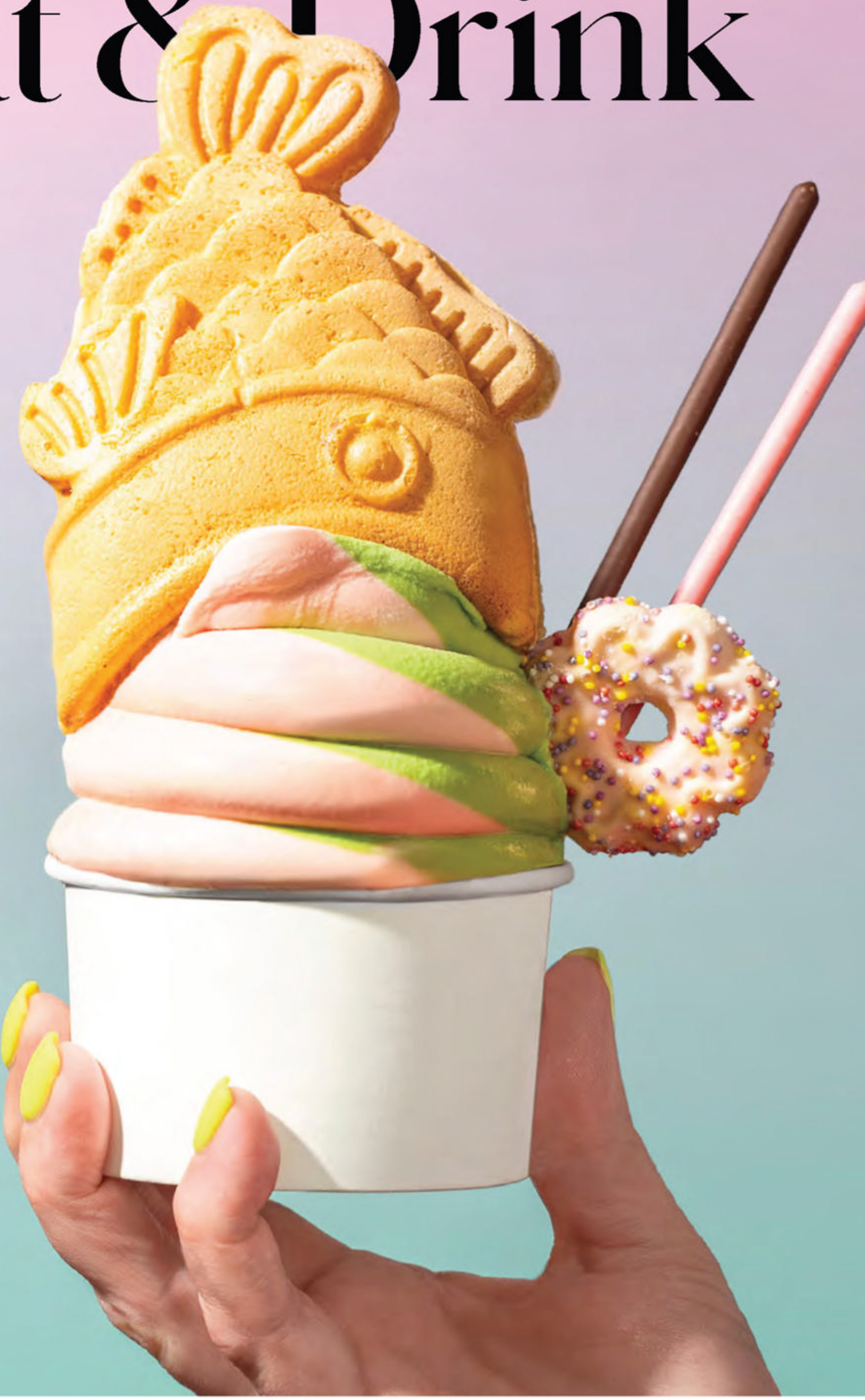

A Fish Tale

The sugary scent of batter caramelizing on a hot press wafts half a block up and down 16th Street where it crosses Larimer Street. Follow your nose to the cheery Ichigo Matcha tea kiosk and prepare yourself to utter the words "fish" and "waffle" in the same sentence, because that beckoning aroma is a warm waffle shaped like a sea bream—complete with fins, scales, eyes, and a wide-open mouth. Its hollow, chocolate-lined body is where soft-serve ice cream (matcha, strawberry, or the all-but-mandatory swirl of both) goes. You can also call the waffle taiyaki, as it's been known in Japan for more than 100 years, if you prefer, but don't walk away before owner Emma Lkhagvajav bedazzles your frozen treat with Pocky sticks (think crunchy, chocolate-dipped chopsticks) and a colorful cookie. Ichigo also specializes in iced matcha and fruit lattes and fizzy, creamy, frothy smoothies (with or without popping boba pearls), adding ample options for chilling out on a hot summer day. But if you're looking to haul in a different kind of catch, try a trio of mini taiyaki filled with gooey cheese, molten Nutella, or surprisingly savory red bean paste.

—**MARK ANTONATION**

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH BANKS

Food For The Soul

One of Denver's most tenacious restaurant families continues to share the love at the newest incarnation of their Southern and Caribbean restaurant. —ALLYSON REEDY

From left: Jerk chicken and sides with wings and a pate; co-owner Fathima Dickerson

When Fathima Dickerson turned over the keys to her family's Welton Street Cafe in Five Points in 2022, she couldn't breathe. "It's like moving out of your childhood home," she says. "A location like that is where all your memories are."

Lease issues forced the beloved cafe out of the space it had occupied for 23 years. It took nearly three years after that for Fathima and the family members (her mother, Mona; her father, Flynn; and three of her siblings, Fathim, Cenya, and Chereka) with whom she runs the restaurant to secure a new location a block north on Welton and get it spiffed up and ready for service.

The Southern and Caribbean neighborhood staple reopened in late 2024, and for a while, the new dining room and kitchen didn't feel quite right to Fathima. The Welton Street Cafe, one of the few remaining Black-owned restaurants in the neighborhood, has long been a critical gathering place for Denver's Black population, with a focus as much on serving the community as serving good food. Friends and neighbors collide here—hugging, greeting, checking in. It took time for her to settle into this iteration; the old Welton Street Cafe had always had such a solid sense of place.

Patrons haven't taken as long to adjust, as evidenced by the number of people routinely filling the dining room, which is bigger now and features a new bar and a mural by Paul Vismara depicting Ms. Mona and her native island of Saint Thomas splashed across the back wall. The support is so ardent, in fact, that you'll need a reservation to secure a table (or be prepared to wait), even during lunch. Mona is still in the kitchen cooking the Caribbean dishes that have become my favorites on the menu, including the roster of well-priced pates (in the low teens) and the jerk chicken dinner.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH BANKS

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WELTON STREET CAFE
2883

***From left:* The Welton Steet Cafe's new digs; Flynn, Cenya, and Fathima Dickerson**

If you haven't had a pate (pronounced pah-TAY), think of it as the Virgin Islands' empanada—a pocket of soft dough stuffed with meat, seafood, or veggies (sometimes with cheese, too) and deep-fried until tender and flaky, but not crunchy. My go-to is the beef and cheese, in which the meat and American meld with diced onions and peppers until they form a single oozy delicacy. The just-blistered crust doesn't crack so much as bloom when you bite in.

Hungrier diners go for the entrées. Your choice of fried protein (catfish, chicken, whiting, or shrimp), smothered pork chops, or jerk chicken comes with cornbread or white bread and two sides. The smoky, spicy strips of jerk thigh are slicked with peppery sauce and incredibly tender, thanks to a preparation involving two dry rubs and two wet rubs.

You could also get the jerk in sandwich form, but I prefer the meat as the star of the show. Plus, then you get those divine sides, which are definitely worth discussing and even ordering on their own as a meal, which regulars often do. Almost everyone starts with the macaroni and cheese, whose saucy elbows drip with seven different creamy cheeses. (After one taste, I stole my daughter's cup.) Per Fathima, the collard greens and yams—childhood favorites for much of the cafe's clientele who were raised in the historically Black neighborhood—are among the most-ordered accoutrements.

Wings are popular, too. Seasoned with what the Dickersons call their "Welton Street Essence"—a heavily guarded blend—and deep-fried, they're crispier than most (in a good way). You can order them as-is or, like I did, doused in a vinegary hot sauce that will cling to your fingers and make you sweat (also in a good way).

There's a lot that goes into the frying, sautéing, and grilling of these plates, which means this food takes time. It will not be out in 10 minutes—or maybe even 20 or 30 minutes, depending on how bustling the restaurant is—so come here with patience. You can pretty much count on this being a leisurely meal, just as you can count on seeing a rainbow array of Kool-Aid pitchers behind the counter and Fathima buzzing about the dining room.

After three visits in a short period, I started to crave the Welton Street Cafe. Not just for the food, but for the intrinsic sense of inclusion and community the restaurant offers. How someone says, "Welcome, fam!" to whoever walks through the doors. How its four walls foster a hope that even with everything going on in the world right now, the little guy still has a chance.

Less than a year into its new location, Welton Street Cafe doesn't need to come into its own; it's already there.

WELTON STREET CAFE

2883 Welton St.,
weltonstreetcafe.com

The Draw:
A community-driven restaurant serving classic Caribbean and Southern fare

The Drawback:
Food can take a while, and you may not get in without a reservation

Noise Level:
Medium

Don't Miss:
Jerk chicken, pates, and macaroni and cheese

MAKING MOVES

A brief history of the nearly 40 years members of the Dickerson family have been cooking in Five Points. –AR

1986–90 Flynn and Mona Dickerson open **Caribbean Fast Food** at 31st Avenue and Downing Street. The demand for their food is so strong that they move into a larger space on 26th Avenue just six months later.

1990–93 The Dickersons pull up stakes for a more favorable 26th Avenue spot (where Birdcall is now) and then make their first appearance on Welton Street, just off 23rd Avenue, a year later, changing the eatery's name to **Sadie's**.

1993–94 Forced off Welton Street by light-rail construction, the restaurant moves back to 26th, this time as **Wings and Tings**.

1994–99 Welton Street beckons again, so the Dickersons relocate to the 2700 block, and the eatery becomes **Mona's Wings and Tings**.

1999–2022 The **Welton Street Cafe** is born when the large space at 2736 Welton Street becomes available. The Dickersons begin serving the fried catfish, macaroni and cheese, and jerk chicken fans now clamor for.

2024 There's no name change this time, just a **bigger Welton Street Cafe**—and, for the first time, a liquor license—at 29th and Welton.

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Stuck In Time

Millions of years ago, a volcano created what has become one of Colorado's most beautiful—and least accessible—landscapes. We traveled to Wheeler Geologic Area and learned what it takes to reach the City of Gnomes. BY JAY BOUCHARD

There are probably worse places I could have high-centered my truck. I hear the desert roads of the Western Sahara are quite remote. The old Pamir Highway in Tajikistan, with its landslides and drug traffickers, is no place to be stranded. Every road in Wyoming comes to mind.

But by Colorado standards, this felt like trouble. I was halfway down Forest Service Road 600 when my truck's frame skidded to a stop, settling atop a mound of crud, my right front wheel hanging precariously in the air. In a matter of seconds, the gravity of my situation sunk in. I was 10 miles from Creede as the crow flies—but I was not flying.

Before I beached my Chevy, I was crawling at five miles per hour across the rocks, ruts, and muddy vestiges of the 13-mile, four-wheel-drive doubletrack that connects Wheeler Geologic Area to the outside world. I'd been repeatedly warned about this road. Surrounded by the La Garita Wilderness, I hadn't seen another vehicle for hours. I had no cell service. I was alone, save for my skittish cattle dog, Barry, who would offer no help in dislodging the vehicle.

We were hardly the first to be stranded here. Wheeler offers uniquely magnificent scenery, so much so that in 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt declared it Colorado's first national monument. But getting there has always been a pain. The road's rugged condition—and the tendency of travelers like me to get stuck—is one reason visitation to Wheeler slowed to a trickle and why, 75 years ago, President Harry Truman signed an act abolishing its status as a national monument.

A quick internet search reveals what makes Wheeler so compelling: hundreds of towering, tapered rocks rising like specters from the ground. Some call them Dante's Lost Souls. But now, surveying my run-aground Chevy, I felt my sense of adventure melt away. I cursed myself for not being more careful. I cursed Teddy Roosevelt and Harry Truman. I cursed the entire American forest management apparatus. But I reserved most of my anger for the damn supervolcano that created this slippery plot of earth in the first place.

^ Hiking among the hoodoos at Wheeler Geologic Area

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THE ROCK FORMATIONS in Wheeler Geologic Area are natural wonders unlike anything else in Colorado. "Spires and domes, castles and cathedrals, mosques and temples, with their fluted columns and wonderfully carved friezes, were arrayed in a confusing panorama of form and color," wrote Frank C. Spencer, supervisor of the San Juan National Forest, after visiting the area in 1907.

Those spires—hoodoos, as they're commonly called—are layers of volcanic tuff that have been eroding for millions of years, the products of pyroclastic eruptions from the La Garita Caldera, an extinct supervolcano that created the San Juan Mountains. Essentially, a very large volcano erupted nearly 30 million years ago, and its ash congealed into soft terrain that wind and rain have been chiseling for eons, creating what now look like studio props from *Star Wars*.

It's hard to know who first laid eyes on the geologic marvel, which has also been nicknamed the City of Gnomes. Wheeler resides in the Ute Indian Tribe's ancestral homeland, and though there are no petroglyphic records or archaeological evidence of their presence at Wheeler, the area was almost certainly known to the Ute people long before European explorers made their way to the West nearly 400 years ago.

Among the 19th-century explorers was John C. Frémont, a checkered character who led numerous Western expeditions, later becoming a senator in California and a candidate for president. In 1848, one of Frémont's traveling parties may have encountered the hoodoos while searching for a railroad route in the San Juan Mountains. (They were rumored to have resorted to cannibalism after becoming stranded nearby during a blizzard.)

Almost 60 years later, a Ute sheepherder told Spencer about the unique formations. Spencer formed a scouting party, which included local hotelier Elwood Bergey (who had claimed previously he'd seen them from a distance), and was immediately taken by the unusual landscape, christening hoodoos on their distinctive characteristics: the Bee Hives, the Ghosts, the Cathedral. "The almost endless variety of forms could have made this play of fancy an almost indefinite pastime," Spencer wrote. He was so enamored he returned home and penned a passionate note to his superiors, arguing for the area to be given national monument status.

Although he never visited the area, President Theodore Roosevelt took that recommendation on December 7, 1908, designating 300 acres of national forest land as Colorado's first national monument. The area was named for George Montague Wheeler,

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a cartographer and explorer who surveyed about a third of Colorado but (ironically) never recorded a visit to the monument that carries his name.

Wheeler's popularity initially increased in the 1910s after its federal designation, attracting hikers and horseback tourists who were promised geologic wonders rivaling those of Yellowstone National Park. From enterprising locals like Bergey, the hotelier, there was even a brief effort to build a paved road from Creede to the monument until the National Park Service, fearing it would put too much stress on the environment, squashed their plans.

By 1950, visitation to Wheeler had plummeted (it recorded only 43 guests in 1943). Even rangers rarely ventured there: The National Park Service oversaw Wheeler from its outpost more than 150 miles away at Mesa Verde National Park. "That's a long way to go to manage a national monument," says Mike Blakeman, who lives outside of Creede and spent 41 years working in various roles for the USFS. "The National Park Service didn't have anyone who could go up there, so even when it was a national monument, the Forest Service was the primary caretaker."

Truman ended the charade on August 3, 1950, by signing an act of Congress that abolished Wheeler National Monument and officially transferred its management to the USFS. "Ultimately, they made the right decision," Blakeman says.

The USFS expanded the protected area from 300 to 640 acres, and in 1969, it was renamed Wheeler Geologic Area—a lesser designation meant to preserve terrain of note.

Today, Forest Service Road 600, which stops just short of the formations, is cherry-stemmed, meaning the path has wilderness on both sides. There have been attempts to repair it over the years, Blakeman says, but maintenance only seems to make the route worse. The earth is so erosive, its ashy soil so quick to shift in a sudden downpour, that land managers have come to accept an uncomfortable truth: A trip to Wheeler will never go smoothly.

MY JOURNEY TO WHEELER began with a call from an editor at this magazine inquiring about my vehicle's drivetrain. There might be an assignment in it for me if my truck could handle the trip. I read a few overlanding blogs about Forest Service Road 600 and paid careful mind to a warning on the Rio Grande National Forest website that prescribed "4x4 vehicles or ATVs" for the road (described as "extremely rough with deep ruts, narrow turns, and some steep hills").

I figured I'd driven worse, so I set off for Wheeler on a Tuesday morning in early October. I left Denver at 4:45 a.m. and made it to South Fork by 9. Before I drove up to Hansen Mill Campground (the lone trailhead for Wheeler), I called the Creede Ranger Station to inquire about the condition of Forest Service Road 600. The ranger on duty said she had driven her Toyota 4Runner up the day before and found it manageable. At mile 10, though, there was a particularly narrow section. She asked how wide my truck was (answer: wider than her SUV). She wished me luck. My alternative would have been hiking 7.5 relatively flat miles from Hansen Mill to Wheeler on the East Bellows Creek Trail, a more direct approach but also more time-consuming. Or so I thought.

At Hansen Mill, I reset my trip odometer and began the slow climb. I recorded mileage at each tricky stretch, knowing I'd eventually have to return the way I came. At mile six, I barely cleared a series of deep ruts. At mile 10, as the ranger predicted, I narrowly squeezed

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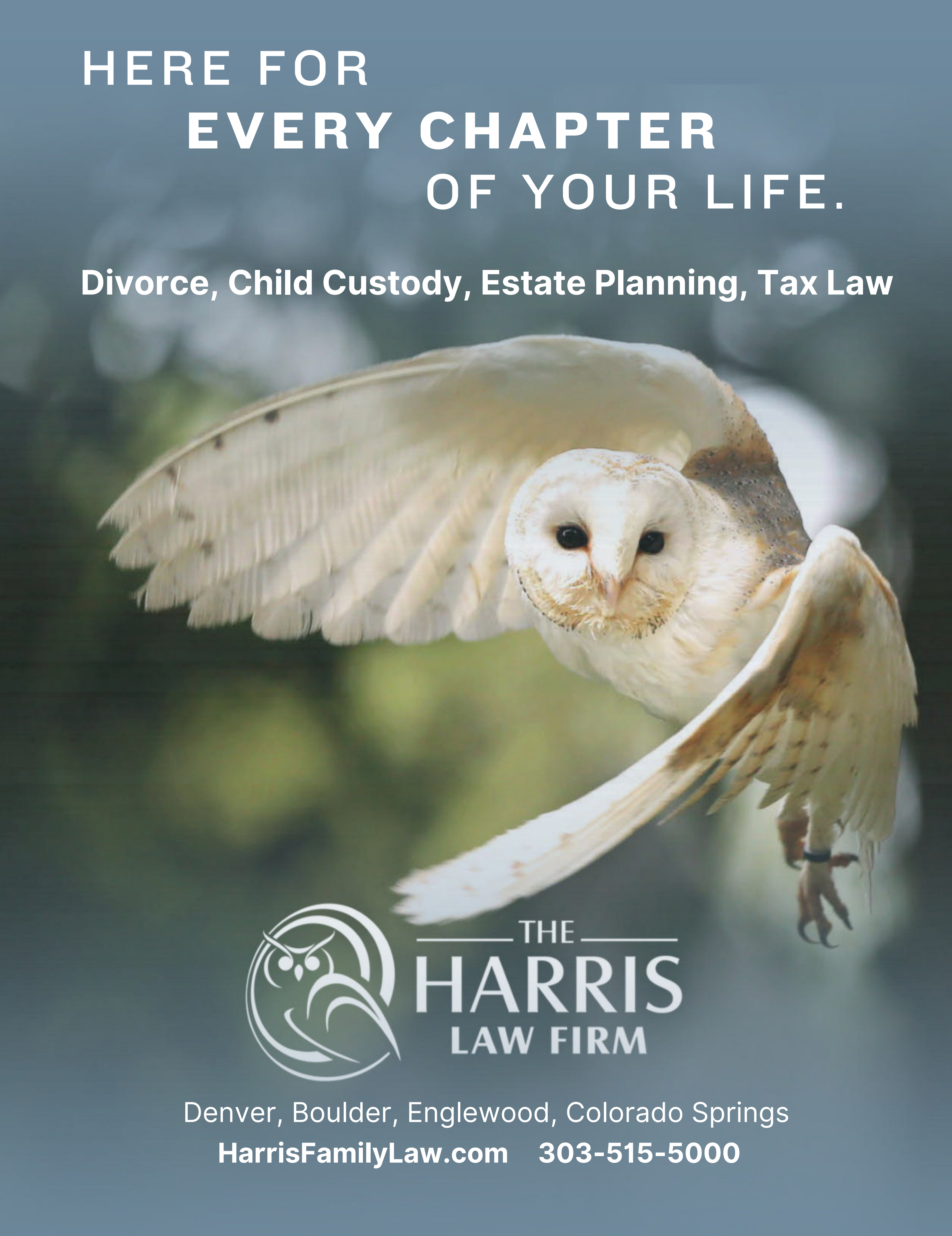

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between a stand of pines. After covering 13 miles in three hours, the Wheeler parking area—a wide dirt turnaround—came into view.

Just before hiking up to the formations, I heard hikers' voices in the distance. I introduced myself to Lisa and Craig Conner and their 20-year-old son, Dan, who had hiked from Hansen Mill. They'd also traveled from Denver and, in Lisa and Craig's case, were returning to a place they'd visited together nearly 30 years earlier. Before their day was over, they would trek nearly 18 miles. "It's cool that it's hard to get there, that it's still rugged," Lisa told me when we spoke again months later. "We didn't see anyone else hiking, not a soul. We've done a fair bit of hiking all over the world, but we're always going to remember that."

I followed the trio up the approach trail, and after a steep half-mile climb, the main event was upon us. I'd seen hoodoos in New Mexico and Utah, but the spires at Wheeler were astonishing and familiar in a way I couldn't place at the time. Each outcropping was different, but the most visibly striking of the bunch were skinny and tall—ashy gnomes balancing pointy rocks on their heads. (Later, it hit me: They look a lot like the mushrooms a parking lot drifter might offer you before a Red Rocks concert.)

The Connors eventually departed so they could get back to their car before dark, and I had Wheeler to myself. Hiking the three-mile Wheeler Loop Trail above the formations through a spruce-fir forest, I realized I hadn't been alone this deep in a wilderness area in ages, if ever. The trail beneath my feet narrowed to a foot wide, with grass overtaking the path in some sections. I heard only the wind blowing through creaky treetops and Barry's mild panting. The silence was soon overwhelming, even eerie, an experience that's getting increasingly rare in Colorado. This was, after all, the whole point of a wilderness area.

But for some, Wheeler has grown too busy. Blakeman, who says he's visited about 50 times in his life, hasn't traveled to the area in three years. "Wheeler's been discovered by more people over the past 20 years," he says. "It's now known, and it's on people's bucket list. People are getting towed out of there every year." He notes that outfitters in Creede and South Fork rent ATVs to visitors who deteriorate the access road and increase pressure on the area's fragile geology.

On this autumn Tuesday, though, I enjoyed what folks like Blakeman had once found easily at Wheeler. I thought about camping near the monument, but dark clouds were rolling in, and I had no interest in driving a slick road the next morning. At 4 p.m., I set off, trying to remember which sections might give me trouble.

AS I APPROACHED the most rutted area, I guided my wheels to the right side of the road, easing the front end down a steep embankment. That's when my frame landed on the rut. I reversed. No dice. I shifted into four-wheel low. Nothing. I had basic recovery and survival tools on hand: a shovel, a hydraulic jack, tow straps, camping gear, and a satellite messaging device. What I really needed—a winch—I did not have. I tried not to dwell on the prospect of spending the night in a disabled vehicle, or the expense of a recovery.

Examining my tires, I realized that by cranking my steering wheel hard to the left and reversing in four-wheel low, I might get enough traction to pop my frame free. I shifted and slowly hit the accelerator. The engine whined, the rear wheels pulled like draft animals, and in one holy motion, the front tires engaged and the whole truck rose up. Reversing out of the rut with too much speed, I scooted backward across the road into a bush. Free at last, I pointed my truck toward civilization.

> That's when my frame landed on the rut. I reversed. No dice. I shifted into four-wheel low. Nothing.

When I returned to Hansen Mill, there was enough daylight to make camp and steady my nerves. A journey that started in the early morning darkness at my home in Denver transported me millions of years to a world where volcanoes and their ashy remnants ruled the landscape. The experience also had me thinking about the generations of land managers who have kept Wheeler so rugged, the way we access wild places, and how we encounter misfortune within them.

In Colorado, the easiest way to see our natural wonders is often turning over an engine. With some regret, I thought about what I might have seen had I walked in. I also thought about how close I came to disaster on my way out. Mostly, though, I thought about those wild spires rising out of the earth and how I'd like to see them again.

When that day comes, I'll hike. ▲▲

Jay Bouchard is a Denver-based writer and former *5280* editor. He has spent much of the past decade exploring far-flung places in Colorado and has only twice misplaced a vehicle deep within a forest. Send feedback to letters@5280.com.

GET IN ON THE ACTION
That's WY

A road trip from Denver takes you straight to Wyoming's legendary rodeos and fairs, where the spirit of the West runs deep. From heart-pounding bronc rides at Laramie County Fair Ranch Rodeo to classic carnival rides at the Wyoming State Fair, experience the whirlwind of tradition, competition and celebration—all in true Western fashion.

THE SPIRIT OF THE WEST WONT BE BROKEN
Jess Oldham
MODERN EXPLORER
That's WY

What's wild will always require wide-open refuge. Which is why, in Wyoming, some cowboys will always work to provide that sanctuary and ensure there's more than enough room to run. So come witness the West at its wildest, and discover how Wyoming's Modern Explorers help keep it that way at **WYModernExplorers.com.**

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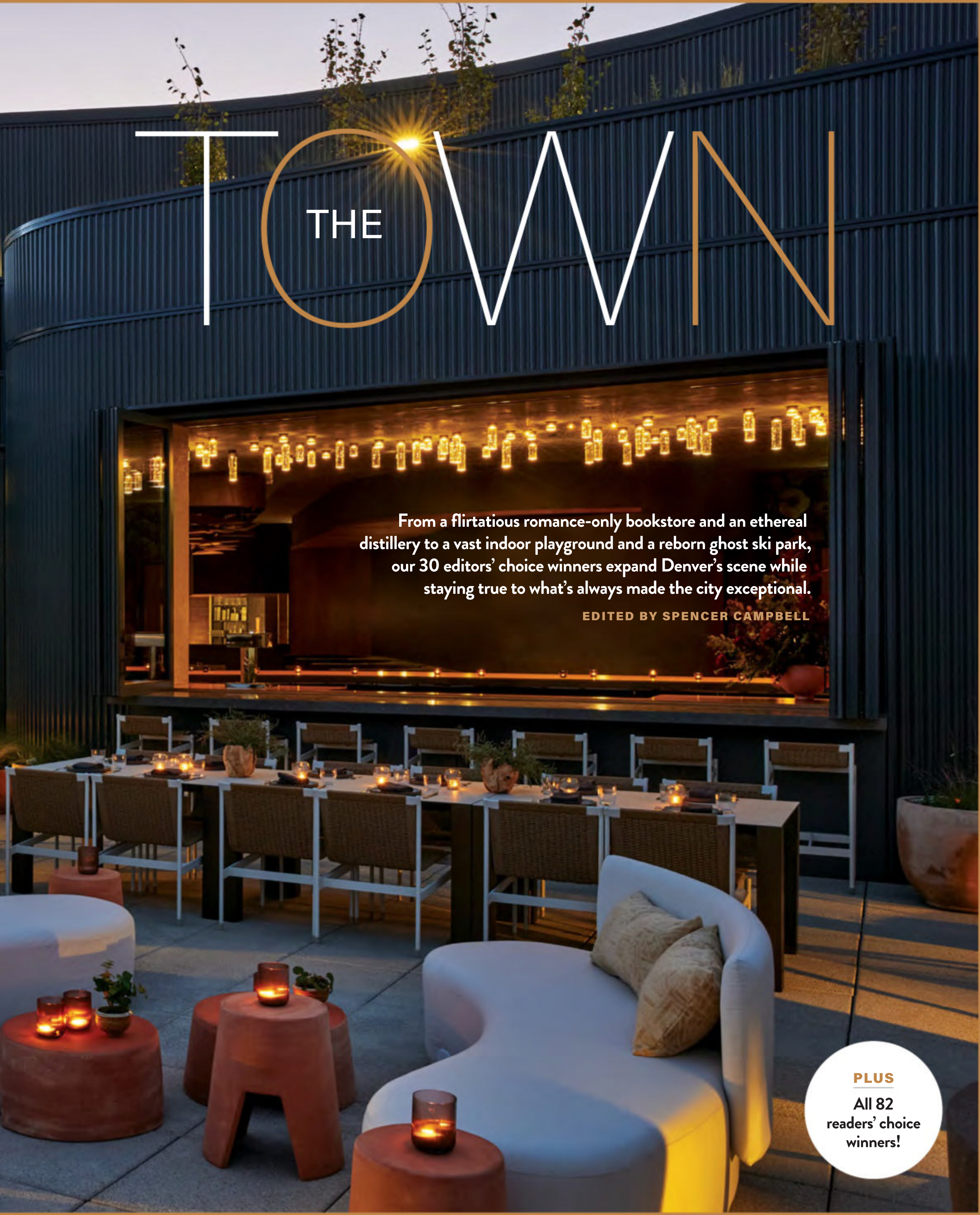
TOP OF

Stellar Jay's rooftop patio atop the Populus Hotel

THE TOWN



From a flirtatious romance-only bookstore and an ethereal distillery to a vast indoor playground and a reborn ghost ski park, our 30 editors' choice winners expand Denver's scene while staying true to what's always made the city exceptional.

EDITED BY SPENCER CAMPBELL

PLUS

All 82 readers' choice winners!

FAQ

How we selected this year's Top of the Town honorees.

How does *5280* pick Top of the Town winners?
Our reporters and editors spend months exploring the city to choose winners for select categories on the ballot. We try to do our research anonymously and pay for all meals and services, where possible. Our readers also pick their favorites for every category by casting votes via our online ballot. The businesses that receive the most votes win.

Don't the magazine's advertisers automatically win?
Nope. Top of the Town recognitions are based only on our research and readers' votes; there is zero connection between advertisers and winners. The fact that some winners happen to be advertisers does not influence our selections. Sure, we could make some folks happy by "selling" winners, but in the end, we'd lose a lot more than we'd gain—like our integrity and credibility with you.

How can my business get on the ballot?
Our ballot is a write-in format, meaning we don't provide multiple-choice options. Voters can suggest whatever restaurant, store, person, or service they deem worthy for every category.

I have a business that deserves an award. How can I win?
Reach out to our editors with your story. Encourage your customers to vote for you next year. (The readers' choice ballot opens in late January.)

How do I vote?
Visit vote.5280.com and cast your ballot. It's that simple.

TOP VEGAN/VEGETARIAN

The Corner Beet

Well before vegan food was trending on social media, there was the Corner Beet, sitting quietly on Ogden Street in Capitol Hill. Originally started as a cold-pressed juice and coffee spot, the sunlit restaurant has since expanded to serve a mostly from-scratch menu at breakfast, lunch, and weekend brunch. Dishes like toast topped with beet butter, an egg-and-mushroom breakfast sandwich, and Thai peanut salad are just as enticing to vegans and vegetarians as to those without any dietary restrictions. But the real reason the Corner Beet has managed to stay relevant for more than a decade is the community it's built: open mics on Mondays, a monthly stand-up comedy show, vendor markets, and tarot readings on the regular. The restaurant also anchors the Roots Collective, a quartet of wellness-focused businesses on the same block that most recently saw the addition of a sauna and cold plunge via Garden Sauna. The Corner Beet team gets that a healthy lifestyle may include buying a superfood latte, but it's really about where and how you spend your time. *—Daliah Singer*

TOP FRIED CHICKEN

Blazing Chicken Shack II

Ordering fried chicken requires a leap of faith. You've gotta trust the restaurant—that it's going to give you the crackly-crusted bird that tastes of summer Sundays and passed-down secrets, not the soggy, woeful legs and wings flying out of too many kitchens. At Park Hill's eight-year-old Blazing Chicken Shack II—helmed by married owners Leola Gant and Rhonda Banks—the Southern-style fried chicken is the gospel truth. The crispy, salty, glistening bird is flavored down to the last crumb, the meat so juicy it's practically dripping on first bite. These ladies grew up eating soul food in the Midwest, where their mothers and grandmothers filled their childhoods with collard greens and fried fowl. This lifelong education gives them the know-how to dash the batter with extra seasonings (which ones, exactly, they won't say) and to lacquer the pieces with buttermilk and yellow mustard to lock in the juices. Finally, they know that each and every piece must be fried to order, which takes time and inspires more than a little agony while you count down the minutes, the aromas from the fryer permeating the cozy space. The chicken is worth the wait, and so are the sides: You get two with your order, and though all are great, the collards (just like the main course) are the best in town. *—Allyson Reedy*

Previous spread: Courtesy of Yoshihiro Makino. This page: Courtesy of the Roots Collective

2025 READERS' CHOICE WINNERS

DINING **Bakery** Olive & Finch **Barbecue** GQue Barbeque **Breakfast Burrito** Bonfire Burritos **Brunch** Olive & Finch

Sarah Banks

TOP BURGER **A5 Steakhouse**

At its core, the West Coast–style burger is a humble offering: a thin, chargrilled patty topped with a tangy sauce and served on a sesame seed bun. The success of the dish depends on the flavor of the beef—something you'd expect a steak house to nail, and A5 in LoDo doesn't disappoint. Chef Max MacKissock's six-ounce patty is a blend of Japanese and American wagyu bavette, picanha, and striploin perfectly charred over a wood grill. The house-made milk bread bun, dotted with black sesame seeds, is expertly toasted to retain squishiness, soak up juices, and audibly crunch with each bite. (Added bonus: It sits perfectly flush with the patty, which is oh-so-satisfying.) A concoction of mayo, Dijon mustard, white vinegar, pickles, onion, and Louisiana hot sauce delivers a sharp dose of tang, while a soft German butterkäse melts across the patty like American cheese but isn't processed. As you might expect, excellence doesn't come cheap ($22), but at least it comes cheaper ($15) during happy hour. *—Perry Santanachote*

Burger Zig Zag Smokin' Burger **Chef** Richard Villalobos **Chinese** Hop Alley **Coffeeshop** Blue Nest Coffee **Deli** Leven Deli Co. **Dessert** Xiquita Restaurante y Bar **Ethiopian** ▶

TOP DESSERT **Baumé**

In social media vernacular, the term “sweet treat” has come to encompass everything from an iced coffee to a stale Hershey’s Kiss from the office bowl. To that, we say: Dream bigger, Denver. If you’re going to spoil yourself, do it in style at Union Station’s new dessert and Champagne bar, Baumé. Occupying the raised center platform of the recently refreshed LoDo hub from 4 to 10 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, it’s a perfect post-dinner spot to see and be seen nibbling exquisitely composed fruit tarts, cheesecake, and layered gâteaux from Michelin-starred pastry chef Kevin McCormick. Pairing notes (“goes well with chocolate”) on the concise list of bubbly options will help you choose what’s in your flute, while live piano music mingles with the chatter of Terminal Bar patrons below. Just passing through? Snag a pistachio, peanut butter, or chocolate cookie from the retail counter, which opens at noon daily. The decadent $6 pucks come generously and gorgeously topped; we love the pistachio’s white chocolate hunks, dollops of raspberry jam, and hot pink and green nut crumble. But before you take a bite, be sure to snap a photo of your dessert nestled in Baumé’s elegant to-go box (white marble, gold foil trim) and tag it: #sweettreat. *—Jessica LaRusso*

COOKIES
PISTACHIO | 6
raspberry jam
PEANUT BUTTER | 6
caramel, milk chocolate, fleur de sel
CHOCOLATE | 6
caramel, cocoa nib
A DESSERT BAR
CAKES & TA
COCONUT TART | 7
almond crust

Joni Schrantz/Courtesy of Baumé

Konjo Ethiopian Food **Food Truck** Big Apple Bodega **French** La Forêt **Fried Chicken** The Post **Greek** Pete’s Central One **Ice Cream** Little Man Ice Cream **Indian** Coriander

TOP VIETNAMESE

Dân Dã

Dân Dã has only been around for a year, but its history stretches back far longer than that. Sisters An and Thao Nguyen based much of their menu around their mother's recipes; Ha Pham opened the long-standing, but now-shuttered, New Saigon in 1987. (An co-owned and was executive chef at Savory Vietnam for nearly five years, and another sister, Thoa, owns Bánh and Butter Bakery Café next door to Dân Dã.) Family and tradition flavor every dish at the casual, bustling eatery on East Colfax Avenue, whether you order bone-in catfish fillets slow-simmered in a clay pot or the spicy lemongrass beef shank soup. But that's not to say the Nguyens haven't put their own spin on things. Unique in Denver, the three-tiered spring roll towers are beautiful feasts that arrive at the table bursting with your choice of proteins, fresh herbs, rice noodles, and all the fixings. No matter your order, you're in good hands as the servers—often An's and Thao's husbands—will helpfully walk you through the extensive menu. But really, you can't make a wrong choice, especially if you pair your pick with a lychee limeade or Vietnamese coffee. *—DS*

COFFEE SARAP

Sarah Banks

TOP COFFEESHOP

Coffee Sarap

Denver has no shortage of coffeeshops serving Americanos and breakfast burritos, which is why Coffee Sarap is such a welcome addition to our flourishing cafe scene. The six-month-old RiNo spot offers something entirely new for the metro area, with its Filipino–inspired menu highlighting a number of Southeast Asian ingredients, including pandan (the plant imparts a vanillalike flavor), ube (purple yam), and calamansi (a citrus fruit) in lattes, cold brews, and lemonades. Forgoing caffeine? The Mestiza—in the Philippines, the term refers to someone of mixed Filipino and foreign heritage—is a dairy-free Filipino horchata flavored with cinnamon and vanilla. Must-try pastries include the sylvannas—cashew-meringue cookies sandwiching sweet buttercream—and a Filipino bread called pandesal. Burritos, like the beef tapa, are made for the cafe by Paborito, a local Filipino barbecue ghost kitchen. If the options sound overwhelming, the staff behind the counter are happy to help, explaining ingredients and sharing their favorites. Such hospitality is exactly what owners and friends Chelsey Solemsaas and Hannah Cambronero (*pictured, from left*) envisioned when they started Sarap as a pop-up back in 2022: an approachable venue to share their culture and heritage. *—DS*

TOP STEAK HOUSE

Carne

As the founder of Super Mega Bien and Work & Class, both in RiNo, and culinary partner of Casa Bonita, Dana Rodriguez is familiar with unique dining concepts. Still, Rodriguez felt Denver was missing a specific kind of eatery: a welcoming steak house that focuses more on culturally diverse dishes than dress codes and dollar signs. That's why she opened Carne in RiNo last July. "A lot of steak houses feel overly masculine," Rodriguez says. "I don't want to leave work and feel like I need to dress up to go to dinner." At Carne, you won't find white tablecloths and cigars, but instead boho-inspired interior design (including murals painted by local multimedia artist A.L. Grime), fruity cocktails, and a help-yourself wine wall. But it's Rodriguez's commitment to global fare that makes Carne stand out. The dry-rubbed tri-tip is prepared Argentinian-style, the grilled sirloin Brazilian. That being said, our favorite dish might be the Colorado lamb lollipops, which are coated with a secret umami rub, grilled to order, and served with au poivre sauce on the side. "I want people to come and feel like they're eating at my house," Rodriguez says. "It's unpretentious comfort food that makes you feel good." *—Barbara O'Neil*

Italian Meatball Eatery and Libations **Japanese** Domo Japanese Country Food **Korean** Tofu Story **Latin American (Excluding Mexican)** Lucina Eatery & Bar **Mexican** Centro ▶

TOP CHINESE

NBX Asian Cuisine

Things you don't expect at American Chinese restaurants: a small menu, a complimentary small bite before your meal, and a chef who visits each table. These are all part of the experience at Lone Tree's NBX, where the Cao family offers warm hospitality to match delicious steamers of dumplings, platters of noodles, and simmering clay pots. Your evening could start with a free dish of pickled green beans or delicate sesame-laden crackers presented by the chef as he reviews the menu—kept tight to showcase the slow braises and subtle sauces of his home region of Shandong and the bolder, spicier plates from Sichuan that are also a focus here. Start with plum-size steamed or fried buns or the Chinese hamburger, which is akin to a fresh-baked pita stuffed with spiced beef or pork. Liangpi, chilled wheat noodles topped with crisp, julienned vegetables and spicy sesame sauce, is a great follow-up before diving into an entrée of bone-in Shandong chicken in a lush and umami-rich brown sauce, fish with pickled cabbage, or whole braised lamb leg. *—MA*

TOP MEXICAN

Luchador Taco & More

The name doesn't lie. At chef Zurisadai Resendiz's shoebox-size Whittier cantina, expect more punch, more personality, and definitely more than tacos. In fact, there's such a riot of flavors and ingredients happening here—gathered from the chef's experiences growing up in Mexico City, leading the kitchens at Cattivella and Shanahan's Steakhouse, operating a food truck, and traveling with his wife in her home country of Peru—that you may be tempted to skip the tacos altogether. But do so and you'll miss out on achingly tender lengua, fanciful pulpo (octopus) al pastor, and unapologetic cochinita pibil—slow-braised pork with so much Yucatecan tang and fire that it all but spills out onto the sidewalk outside. There's also serious cooking going on with Luchador's large plates. Resendiz blends a dizzying array of spices and ingredients into the duo of moles (a green and red tag-team of pipian verde and pasilla adobo) on his chicken enmoladas, and he pours his soul into a surprising Old World dish of crispy polenta mounded with mushrooms and touched with the New World flavors of cilantro and pepitas. Yes, Luchador is a love letter to the Distrito Federal, but don't miss a Mexican's take on Peruvian causa: velvety whipped potatoes that Resendiz tops with shrimp ceviche, avocado, chile morita aïoli, and ají amarillo. No matter what you choose, every bite is infused with Resendiz's masterful mix of bold and subtle, a stunning combo that hits hard—like an elbow drop from the top rope. *—Mark Antonation*

TOP INDIAN **Spice Room**

With two locations in Denver and one in Arvada, Spice Room lures guests with a savvy combo of Indian street food favorites and homestyle cooking from executive chef Ashok Joshi, making every visit a choose-your-own adventure of fried, baked, braised, and stewed textures and flavors. The menu is long, but eloquent descriptions provide regions of origin and ingredients to help you decide between, say, masala or sambar sauces on your idli (steamed rice cakes). Tour India with northern momo dumplings or southern Goan fish curry, but follow our lead with a starter of mushrooms Manchurian—crunchy fried mushrooms in a fire-engine red (and three-alarm spicy) sauce—and a shareable plate of vada pav, sliders stuffed with fried mashed potatoes and colorful chutneys. Every dish is a deep dive into spices, from complex and herbal methi and ajwain to incendiary fresh and dried chiles. Vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options are plentiful, making Spice Room a perfect outing for a diverse group. *—MA*

Sarah Banks

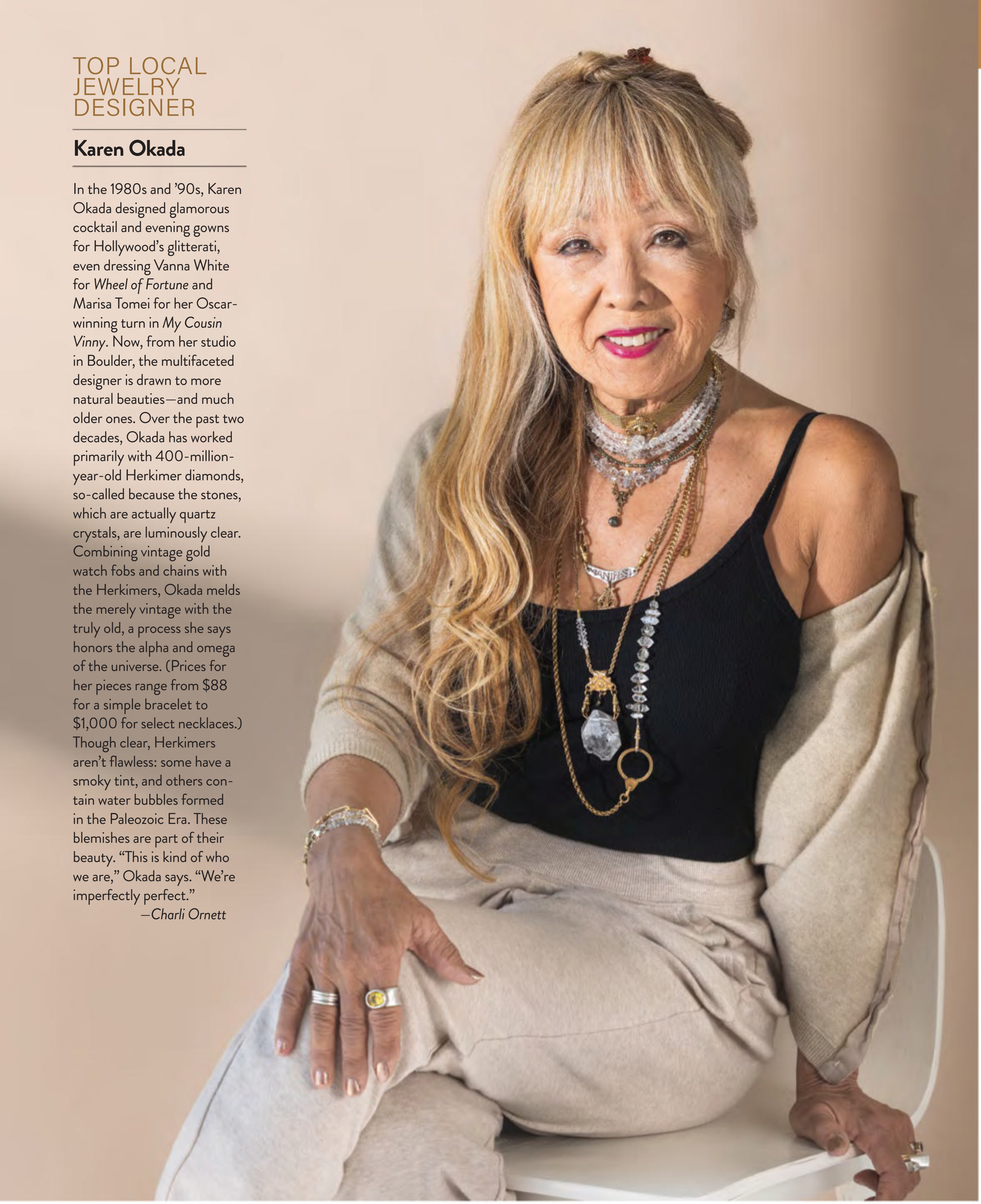
Mexican Kitchen **Middle Eastern** Ash'Kara **New Restaurant** Xiquita **Pizza** Marco's Coal Fired **Seafood** Jax Fish House & Oyster Bar **Soul Food** Welton Street Cafe **Steak House**

TOP NEW RESTAURANT **Osteria Alberico**

Tucked in an Englewood shopping center, Osteria Alberico feels like a surprise. It shouldn't. A new addition to Frasca Hospitality Group (which includes Tavernetta, Sunday Vinyl, and Pizzeria Alberico), Osteria Alberico specializes in regional Italian cooking from chef de cuisine Russell Stippich, a Frasca alum who went on to helm the Nickel, the Populist, and Bar Dough (among others) before returning to the fold. Alberico doesn't aspire to the intricately designed and plated bites that made Frasca famous; rather, the dishes appear minimally manipulated. The handmade pastas—wriggly mafaldine in a hearty tomato-based sauce, thick cassarecce twists carrying typical Calabrian heat—look like Italy on a plate, with flavors just as evocative. Starters and salads come alive with fresh local produce (like Western Slope apples), and entrées, whether a rustic roast chicken or trickier seafood preparations, show equal finesse. Yes, you'll find trendy items like Burrata, gigante beans, and crudo here, but Alberico's unerring flavor combinations and respect for ingredients equate to what Stippich describes as "simplicity and quality—what Italian cooking is all about." *—MA*

Connor Stehr/Courtesy of Osteria Alberico

Bastien's Restaurant **Tacos** Wild Taco Denver **Tamales** Tamales by La Casita **Tapas** Ultreia **Thai** Bua Traditional Thai Cuisine **Vegan/Vegetarian** Gladys Restaurant **Vietnamese** ▶



Sarah Banks

TOP LOCAL JEWELRY DESIGNER

Karen Okada

In the 1980s and ’90s, Karen Okada designed glamorous cocktail and evening gowns for Hollywood’s glitterati, even dressing Vanna White for *Wheel of Fortune* and Marisa Tomei for her Oscar-winning turn in *My Cousin Vinny*. Now, from her studio in Boulder, the multifaceted designer is drawn to more natural beauties—and much older ones. Over the past two decades, Okada has worked primarily with 400-million-year-old Herkimer diamonds, so-called because the stones, which are actually quartz crystals, are luminously clear. Combining vintage gold watch fobs and chains with the Herkimers, Okada melds the merely vintage with the truly old, a process she says honors the alpha and omega of the universe. (Prices for her pieces range from $88 for a simple bracelet to $1,000 for select necklaces.) Though clear, Herkimers aren’t flawless: some have a smoky tint, and others contain water bubbles formed in the Paleozoic Era. These blemishes are part of their beauty. “This is kind of who we are,” Okada says. “We’re imperfectly perfect.”

—Charli Ornett

TOP PLACE TO GO THRIFTING

Strawberry Mountain

The hunt for just the right piece is part of the thrill of thrifting. It's also part of the pain. Most secondhand stores fill rack after rack with used threads, leaving it up to the browser to dig through the dregs to find the treasures. But that's not the case at Strawberry Mountain. Because of the four-year-old shop's small footprint in Denver's Art District on Santa Fe, Strawberry has to be discerning—and owner Nadia MacKinnon's taste is certified by a degree in fashion design and merchandising from the University of Hawaii, Manoa. As a result, pastel geometric murals and '80s-inspired flair consume the store and pay homage to vintage fashion while also cultivating a future-forward vibe. More important than MacKinnon's style, however, is yours, which is why the shop prioritizes current trends, ensuring that—much like Strawberry's boutique vibe—you'll never be out of fashion.

—Robert Sanchez

Good Girls Read Dirty Books
DARK

TOP PLACE TO BUY BOOKS **Spicy Librarian**

Books have always been an escape for Sydney Ivey, so when the former kindergarten teacher decided to leave teaching in December, her next career was clear. The following month, Ivey opened Spicy Librarian, Denver's first romance-only bookstore, in RiNo. Despite the specificity of the selection, there's space for every interest within the genre. The first shelves you'll see—after you follow the painted rose petals through the front door—are dedicated to contemporary romance and local authors. There are also alcoves for fantasy (where the wallpaper transports you to a magical forest), dark romance (adorned with a mirror that reads, "Good girls read dirty books"), and historical romance (look for vintage undergarments spilling out of a trunk). Can't decide where to start? If you have a quarter to spare, get a book recommendation out of the old gumball machine near the register. Or ask one of the employees: Ivey hopes the shop can be a safe space for women to discuss their preferences—both literary and sexual—without shame. But Spicy Librarian isn't just about prioritizing pleasure on the page. If you're over 18, look for two small disco ball cherries that lead to a secret room behind the bookshelf. Inside "the vault," you can shop for luxury sex toys and accessories—all of which focus on the female body. But beware, what was meant to be a quick stop can quickly turn into an all-day affair. "I call it the Spicy Librarian bubble," Ivey says. "You walk in, and nothing else exists." Sort of like getting lost in your favorite romance book. *—Jessica Giles*

TOP CHEF **Johnny Curiel**

Raised in Jalisco, Mexico, Johnny Curiel visited all of Mexico's 31 states, gleaning knowledge from each region's best chefs and rustic food producers. So though many were surprised when Alma Fonda Fina, Curiel's first solo effort, received a Michelin star less than a year after it opened in December 2023, the recognition shouldn't have come as a shock. It was the culmination of a lifetime focused on bringing the variety and complexity of authentic Mexican food to a wider audience: Curiel's camote asado, a soft-roasted sweet potato served with broken salsa macha and fennel-imbued whipped requesón, tastes like a Mexico most Coloradans didn't know existed and has become a defining dish in the Mile High City's canon. Since debuting Alma, Curiel has quickly built a small empire, adding Mezcaleria Alma, Boulder's Cozobi Fonda Fina, and Alteño to the family. The menus at each are so filled with uncommon (in the United States, anyway) ingredients and techniques that you may feel the need to keep a search screen open on your smartphone while ordering. But with his flurry of openings and apparent ability to be in four restaurants at once, Curiel won't rest until his customers no longer need translations and that requesón becomes as familiar as its Italian counterpart, ricotta. Alma means soul in Spanish—and that, at least, needs no explanation. Curiel's food says it all. *—MA*

Sarah Banks

Dispensary LivWell **Distillery** Stranahan's **Festival** Cherry Creek Arts Festival **Happy Hour** Olive & Finch **Kid-Focused Entertainment** Wings Over the Rockies Air & Space Museum ▶

Sam Turley/Courtesy of Black Swan Yoga

TOP YOGA STUDIO

Black Swan Yoga

For something that's supposed to be relaxing, yoga classes can come with a lot of anxiety: At most studios, you must register days ahead of time, then you spend the whole hour wondering if people are judging your inability to tell your left from your right. And that's not to mention what dropping in costs you (around $30 for a single class at CorePower). Black Swan Yoga, a Texas-born brand with more than a dozen studios in its home state and Phoenix and two in Colorado—a hip exposed-brick room in Capitol Hill and a cosmic-mural-bedecked space in Englewood—does things refreshingly differently. If you commit in advance online, expect to pay $12 minimum ($15 is suggested), or give whatever you can as a walk-in. The format means classes can be packed, but circular logos on the floor showing you where to line up eliminate any awkward jostling for position, and once the lights dim and the beats start pumping, you won't mind the proximity to your neighbors. In fact, being mat-to-mat makes you feel less self-conscious, especially in the signature flow classes, where you'll move through positions so quickly you barely have time to realize you're on the wrong side. The temps (around 90 degrees) are balmy, the instructors are cool and inclusive, and the vibes are immaculate. Getting to namaste sans the stress? Sign us up—or, even better, watch us drop in unannounced. —*JL*

TOP PLACE TO SEE A SHOW

(THAT'S NOT RED ROCKS)

The Bluebird Theater

On a Tuesday night in May, New Jersey emo band Phoneboy directed some 500 fans to drop to a crouch, then spring to their feet, giving the 110-year-old Bluebird Theater the feel of a rock 'n' roll aerobics class. The onetime movie house with the cursive, blue-neon marquee visible for blocks along East Colfax Avenue is adaptable that way: In 2018, 16-year-old Billie Eilish and her songwriting brother, Finneas, performed a new song to complete silence; in 2009, Adele covered Patsy Cline and Sam Cooke to a crowd that was audibly losing their minds. At the Bluebird, which reopened for live music 31 years ago and has played host to Oasis, the White Stripes, and Vampire Weekend, every seat in the box-shaped main room is a good one, with easy access to the rear bar. This month, the Bluebird flexes its signature malleability by welcoming country legend Ray Wylie Hubbard (July 10), Abba Disco Night (July 12), and Australian soul band Surprise Chef (July 18).

—Steve Knopper

TOP LOCAL MEN'S BOUTIQUE **M.W. Reynolds**

The last place you expect to find a piece of the British countryside is 30 yards from 16th Street, yet this downtown boutique fuses the crisp tailoring of English fieldwear with the rugged spirit of American sporting culture. Founded in 2005 by Mark Reynolds, a gearhead with a passion for timeless design, his eponymous shop's club chairs, exposed brick, and steel fixtures set a mood that's confident and relaxed in its masculinity, while every item on offer—from Filson's Tin Cloth Cruiser Jackets ($350) to selvedge jeans from Raleigh Denim ($385) to Fishpond's Ridgeline Tech Pack ($240)—is equal parts style and utility. There's a full spread of fly-fishing gear in the back, and the bamboo rods and classic reels lend just enough nostalgia to grab a seasoned angler's interest. Got a loyal retriever back home? The shop sells Barbour-branded bowls, so Fido won't be left out when you enter your new era of upland cool. —*RS*

Patio The Fort **Place to Go Dancing** La Rumba **Place To See A Show (That's Not Red Rocks)** Nocturne **Place To See Art** K Contemporary **Place To Watch The Game** ViewHouse Eatery

TOP DISTILLERY **Laws Whiskey House**

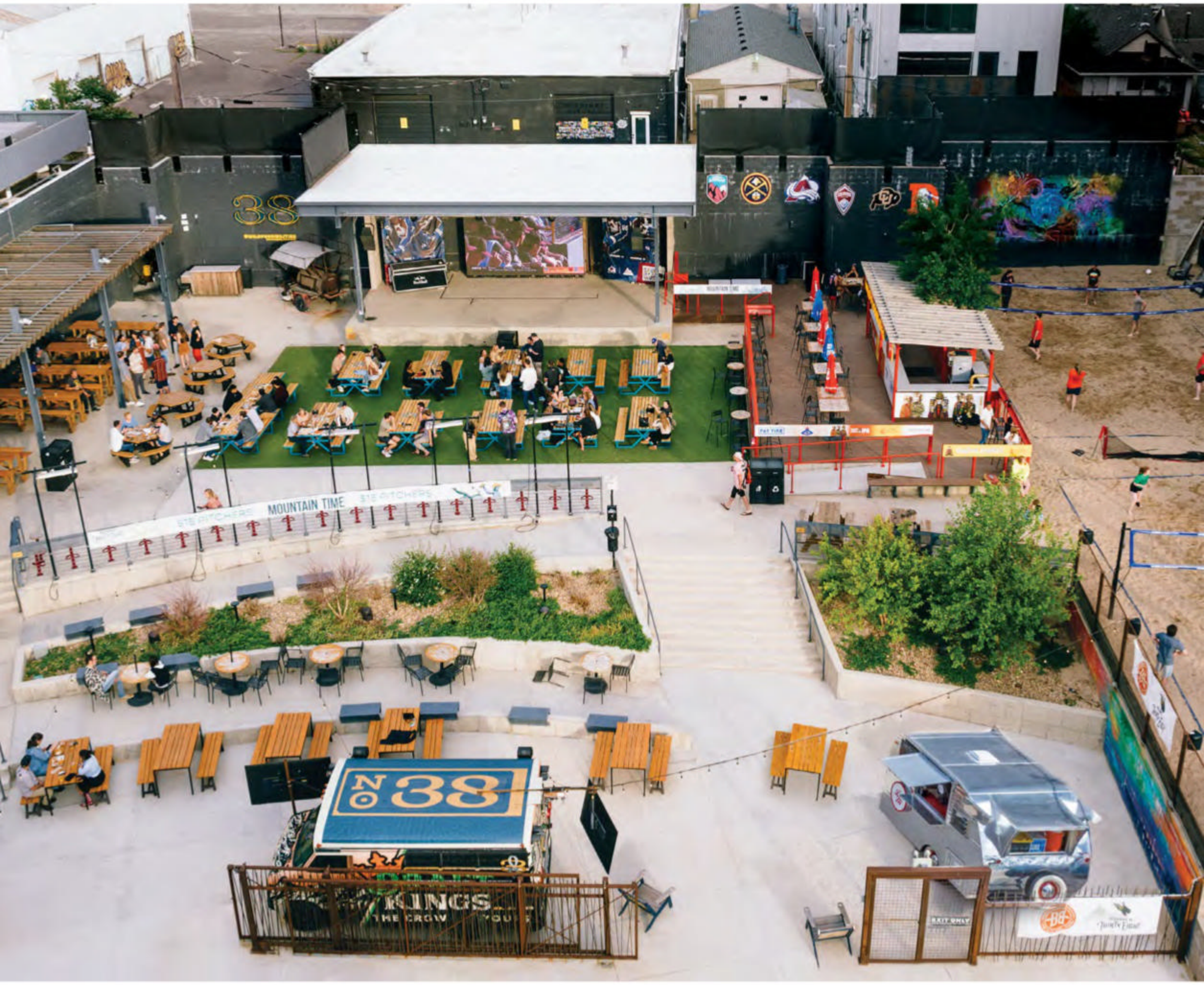
“Whiskey is my religion” sounds like the slogan on a cheesy T-shirt your uncle bought on the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. But Laws Whiskey House’s new 4,000-square-foot Whiskey Sanctuary—attached to its Overland distillery—is anything but tacky. Public tours ($25 per person) begin in the Whiskey Church, where pilgrims sit on pews carved by founder Alan Laws. Peering at distilling equipment through two-story Gothic windows, visitors are indoctrinated with Laws’ creation story (a Wall Street financier found a higher calling in 2011) and reverence for Colorado ingredients. After a walk through the production facility, commune over a guided tasting. A motto Laws has tattooed on his arm fills the curved wall of the intimate bar: “There Are No Shortcuts.” It applies to the distillery’s whiskeys, including Laws Cask Strength Four Grain Bourbon, recognized as the world’s best small-batch bourbon at the 2024 World Whiskies Awards. But it also feels appropriate for the sanctuary, which took seven years to construct. Blessedly, worshippers in search of speedier salvation—expertly mixed drinks such as a whiskey sour or boulevardier—can follow the elegant spiral staircase to the lounge, where velvet upholstery and mountain views await. *—JL*

Connor Stehr/Courtesy of Laws Whiskey House (2)

Bar & Rooftop **Theater Company** Denver Center for the Performing Arts **SERVICES** **Barber** Orion River Krynen **Bike Shop** Mike’s Bikes **Florist** Fern and Bloom **Hair Salon** Mauve ▶

TOP PATIO **Number 38**

Spencer Fronk knows that sometimes, the best part of living in Denver is leaving it. "So many people want to experience the mountains and have that weekend escape," says the co-founder of RiNo's five-year-old Number 38. For those who can't shed the city on Saturday and Sunday, Fronk and his partners set out to re-create the feeling of boundless space in an urban setting by designing the largest patio in Denver, with 20,000 square feet that provide unobstructed mountain views to the west. Of course, Number 38 also offers luxuries the great outdoors can't match, including a stage and massive LED wall—which is usually showing Nuggets, Avalanche, or Broncos games with the sound on. During commercials, expect DJs to keep morale high while emcees toss out T-shirts and freebies (signed Michael Porter Jr. jersey, anyone?). There are two bars, plus an auxiliary service bar when things get busy, but even if you do have to queue up for a local lager, there's not a single inch of Number 38 that doesn't offer a view of a screen. And should spectating spark your own competitive drive? You can drop in and play on one of the two outdoor beach volleyball courts when they're free. —*JG*



Salon + Spa **Interior Designer** Holzarch **Manicure** Etoile Nail Salon, Advanced Nail Care & Beauty Boutique **Massage** Renew Massage Studio **New Hotel** Kimpton Claret Hotel **Pedi-**

TOP SKI RESORT

Cuchara Mountain Park

After decades languishing among the state's ghost ski areas, Panadero Ski Area is back—sorta. Now called Cuchara Mountain Park, the volunteer-run ski spot in southern Colorado officially reopened this past December and offers seven runs (four beginner and three intermediate) and a terrain park, perfect for riders itching to get off I-70. And with $40 day passes and $200 season passes, the price is right. The catch? There's no lift—yet. Folks pack into a 22-seat sled pulled by a snowcat, which rumbles up the former Lift 4 path "like a hayride," says Ken Clayton, a board member for Panadero Ski Corporation, which manages the Huerfano County–owned ski area. After a five-minute trip, shredders cruise to the bottom, where Cuchara Mountain Mercantile dishes up breakfast burritos and pizzas and operates a small convenience store. It's blessedly anti-resort: People chat on the sled and often après over warm beers in the parking area. Volunteers help with grooming and snowmaking, allowing Cuchara to operate on Saturdays and Sundays, December through March. Thanks to a grant secured in January, Cuchara could fix Lift 4 this summer. Also in the works: The area hopes to someday ensure every visitor under 18 can ride free. "We want to create skiers for the future," Clayton says. *—Maren Horjus and Gabe Toth*

This spread, from left: Aaron Colussi; Courtesy of Juan Fuentes (2)

TOP ARTIST

Juan Fuentes

Juan Fuentes gained a following in his 20s, when he began sharing black-and-white photos of the city and its people on his Instagram account, @olddenver. In recent years, Fuentes, 34, has turned the camera around, focusing on his family's immigration story. Born in Mexico, Fuentes stood out during a 2022 Denver Art Museum exhibition of Latin American artists for his visuals of the immigrant experience, including a Google Street View screenshot of an older man walking. "After Google Earth came out, I'd use it to travel virtually," he says. "I was scrolling through the neighborhood near my grandma's house in Chihuahua, and I recognized my uncle immediately." Fuentes' work has appeared in eight exhibitions since 2023, across Colorado and in Texas, California, and Mexico. His next show will open in October at Breckenridge's Old Masonic Hall and will document immigrants who live in Summit County. He says his work feels more urgent in 2025, as the federal government cracks down on immigrants nationwide. "We're portrayed as criminals or victims or political pawns," he says, "but we all have dreams, goals, and families. I'm trying to show the nuance of our everyday lives." *—Rose Cahalan*

Courtesy of HomeDog

TOP PET STORE/SERVICES

HomeDog

Alex Novick is reimagining the modern workday to one that includes your laptop, your latte, and your labradoodle. After years of dreaming up a place where pups and productivity could coexist, he opened HomeDog this summer: a 5,500-square-foot canine-friendly co-working space and cafe on South Broadway, in the former Grandma's House brewery. Rooted in Denver's dog-loving culture, the membership-based concept offers a dog-friendly workspace with reservable booths, a doggy daycare in back, and a separate beer-and-coffee bar up front that's ideal for breaks from barking and back-to-back meetings. Outside, pup-themed murals—including a Scrappy-Doo tribute—brighten HomeDog's private, members-only patio, which provides a low-key zone for both hounds and their humans. Inside, there's high-speed fiber Wi-Fi, and plans are in the works for a mobile grooming partnership—for the times when weekday dog-washing takes a backseat to career-climbing. —*RS*

TOP BABY/ KIDS BOUTIQUE

Wild West Baby Co.

When Britni Jensen was pregnant with her third child, she realized that walking through Target's baby section was, well, uninspiring. The clothes were made of flimsy fabrics, the brands were too corporate, and construction trucks seemed to dot every onesie. Jensen, who owns Denver's Inspyre and April & West boutiques, decided to solve the problem herself, opening Wild West Baby Co. in Berkeley last year. Jensen selects brands that fit her high standards for quality and aesthetics. More important, Jensen makes it a priority to stock mom-owned brands, like Oopsie Daisy, which produces colorful, '70s-inspired swimsuits. Her support for mothers doesn't stop at the items she carries: Wild West hosts free events every month, like baby-and-mom bodywork sessions to help new parents soothe anxiety. "Babyhood is such a short period of life," Jensen says. "It seems long, but it's really so fleeting and magical. I want to embody that magic when you walk in the store." –*BO*

TOP PLACE TO WATCH THE GAME **Joe Willy's**

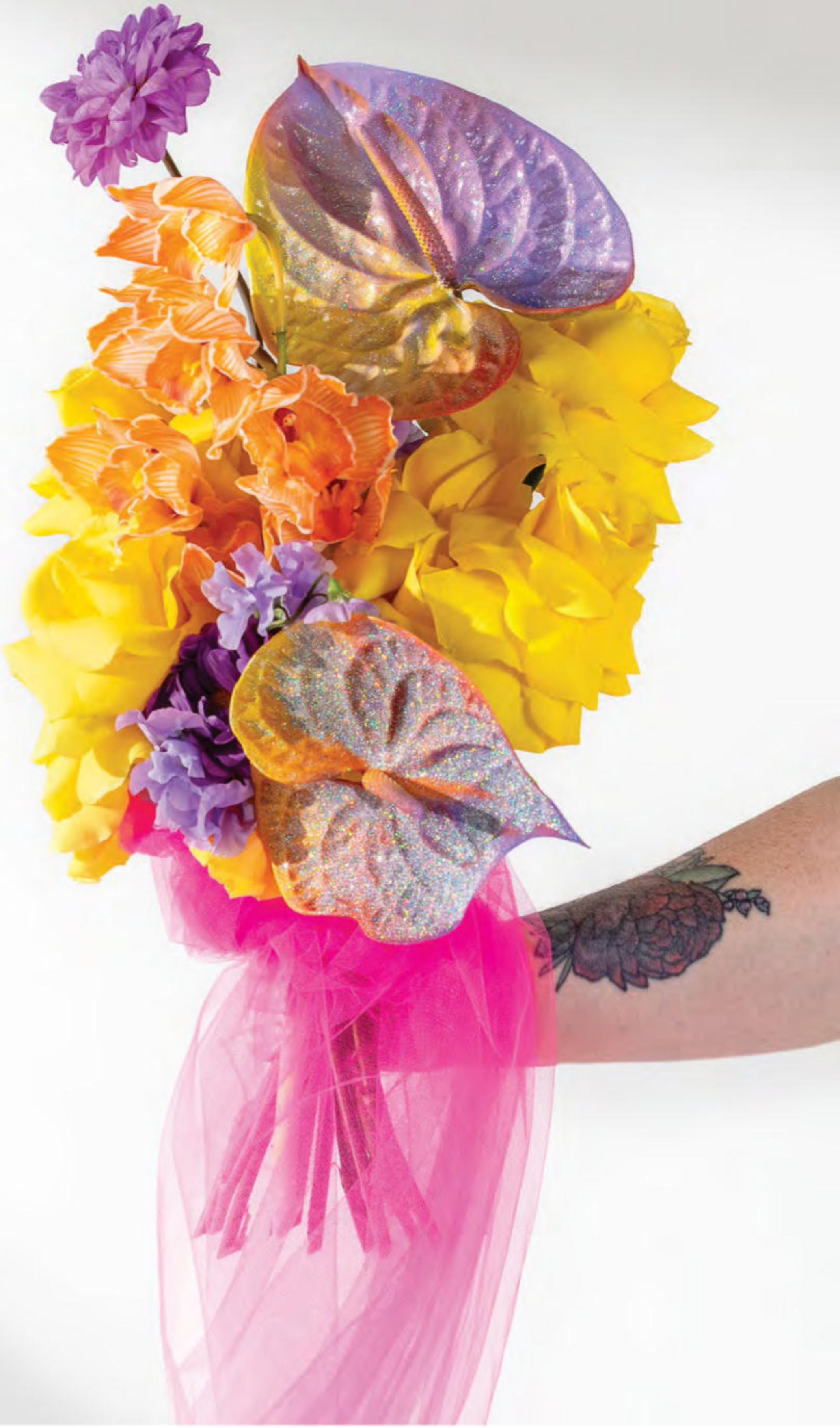
It might be named for a former New York signal caller, but Joe Willy's on Broadway is all Denver. The new sports bar, which opened last summer, boasts a "Colorado-first" TV schedule, meaning the Mile High City's big four franchises and local universities take precedence among its 12 flat-screens and main audio (which also plays in the restrooms, so you'll never miss a down). Yes, there are framed Joe Namath jerseys, but one of them hangs beside the threads of a more locally esteemed icon: Peyton Manning. The latest venture by Ryan Fleming and his cousin Matt Fleming—the latter has been associated with a Hall of Fame–caliber roster of Colorado sports bars, including Spanky's Roadhouse (University), Reivers Bar & Grill (Wash Park), Wazoo's (LoDo), and Giggling Grizzly (LoDo)—Joe Willy's feels just divey enough, with an unassuming black awning along bustling South Broadway. But dip inside and the neighborhood sports bar swallows you whole. Flat-screens wallpaper the dark walls, and pennants, jerseys, magazine covers, and other sports memorabilia decorate the mahogany boards in between (see if you can spot a framed black-and-white photo of Matt's mom receiving a private lesson from golf legend Jack Nicklaus). An L-shaped bartop and a handful of high-tops, low-tops, and booths provide enough seating for about 100 in the cozy confines, and new this summer, look out for a covered patio with more TVs (and, yes, audio too). –*MH*

Mall **Baby/Kids' Boutique** Broomtail **Place To Buy Books** Tattered Cover **Gifts** TigerLily Goods **Home Accessories/Furniture** 5280 Custom Framing **Houseplants** TigerLily **Jewelry**

TOP FLORIST

Blumenhaus

Valen Ibarra's floral designs have more in common with mixed-media sculptures than with typical flower arrangements. She has affixed rhinestones, pearls, artificial feathers, tulle, tiny seashells, and even gummy bears to the wide, waxy leaves of anthurium, one of her favorite flowers. She's perfected a range of techniques—such as tinting, spray painting, airbrushing, and hand painting—to transform a petal's hue. She uses glitter liberally. Together, these elements create a bold, oversaturated style that's been described as cosmic and avant-garde. "It's kind of my interpretation of what flowers would be like on another planet," says Ibarra, who grew up in Aurora, learned to garden from her grandmother, and got serious about floral design in 2020, when the pandemic gave her ample time to experiment. She devoted herself to Blumenhaus full-time in 2021. Focusing solely on custom arrangements, Ibarra made 96 bouquets in 2024 and hopes to double that number this year. Corporate clients, including La Croix, Olaplex, and Ulta Beauty, often hire her to create eye-catching arrangements for events. Sourcing fresh, high-quality flowers that are also sustainably grown is one of her biggest challenges, she says, with most of her plants traveling thousands of miles to Denver from the Netherlands, South America, and even New Zealand. "Things can go missing, things can die," Ibarra says. But when it all comes together, it's worth it: "Flowers don't have to be boring." *—RC*

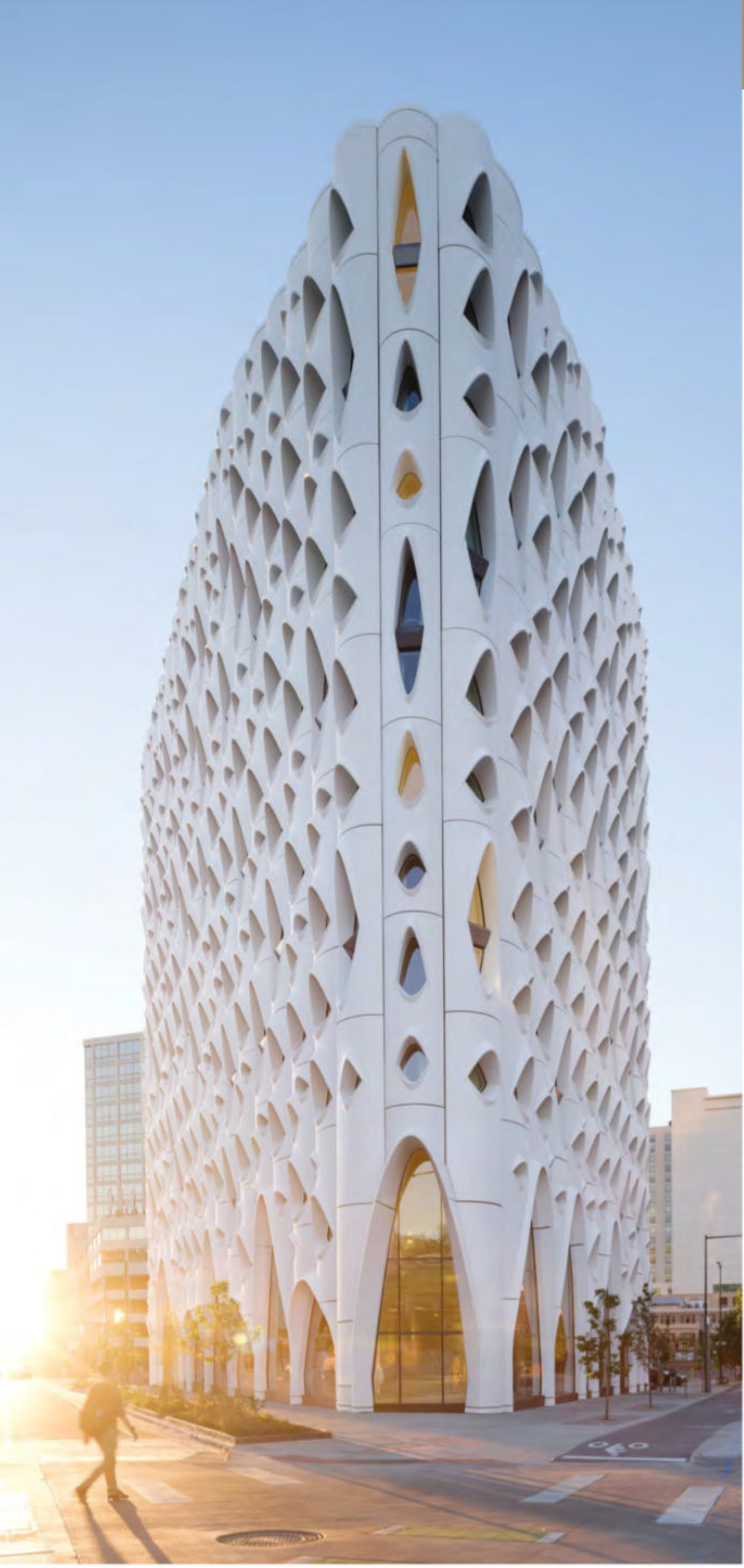


Sarah Banks

TOP NEW HOTEL

Populus

Boundary-pushing design is divisive. That's certainly true in the case of Populus, the ultramodern, nature-inspired downtown hotel that opened this past October. The building's striking white facade, studded with teardrop-shaped windows, is designed to mimic the scarred trunk of an aspen—but some Denverites think it looks more like a giant cheese grater. Others have compared it favorably to the work of Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí, and *Time*, which named the hotel to its 2025 list of the best places to stay worldwide, gushed that Populus "embodies Colorado's iconic tree inside and out." The bold choices extend to the woodland sounds that play in the elevators ("Hearing a bellowing moose without explanation was admittedly a little alarming at first," noted a *Vogue* reviewer) and the hotel's carbon-offset program, which pledges to plant a tree for every night of your stay. That program was widely lauded by the media, until a U.S. Forest Service survey found that 80 percent of spruce seedlings planted the first year didn't survive. (The hotel vowed to try again.) Love it or hate it, one thing is clear: Populus has made a stir, and in a city that doesn't typically make national headlines for its architecture and design, that's a good thing. *—RC*



From left: Courtesy of Steve Hall; Courtesy of Jason O'Rear

Garage Sale Vintage **Wedding Gowns** Grace Loves Lace **SPORTS, OUTDOORS & FITNESS** **Fitness Studio/Gym** Spring House Pilates **Golf Course** The Golf Club at Omni Inter-

TOP PARK

Park Hill Park

We admit it: Park Hill Park isn't much to look at right now. However, we chose this sprawling parcel of land not for its present, but for its long-term promise. Never before has the city acquired so much private property for an urban park, adding 155 acres to a parks system that already ranks 10th in the country, according to the Trust for Public Land. Although the city will open the public green space this summer, expect a bit of an untamed environment. Since Park Hill Golf Course closed in 2018, nature has enveloped its fairways and greens, creating a vast expanse of vacant earth dotted by trees and bisected by crumbling cart paths. Denver Parks and Recreation plans to add basic features such as a dog park, picnic tables, and baskets for a disc golf course in the immediate future, but it will survey city residents before deciding on a big-picture vision. "This is a powerful opportunity to demonstrate that true progress does not come from imposing an outside vision," the area's councilwoman, Shontel M. Lewis, said when the acquisition was announced this past January, "but valuing, centering, and co-creating with community at the center of shaping its future." *—SC*

Courtesy of Boulder Sports Recycler

TOP LOCAL OUTDOOR GEAR STORE

Boulder Sports Recycler

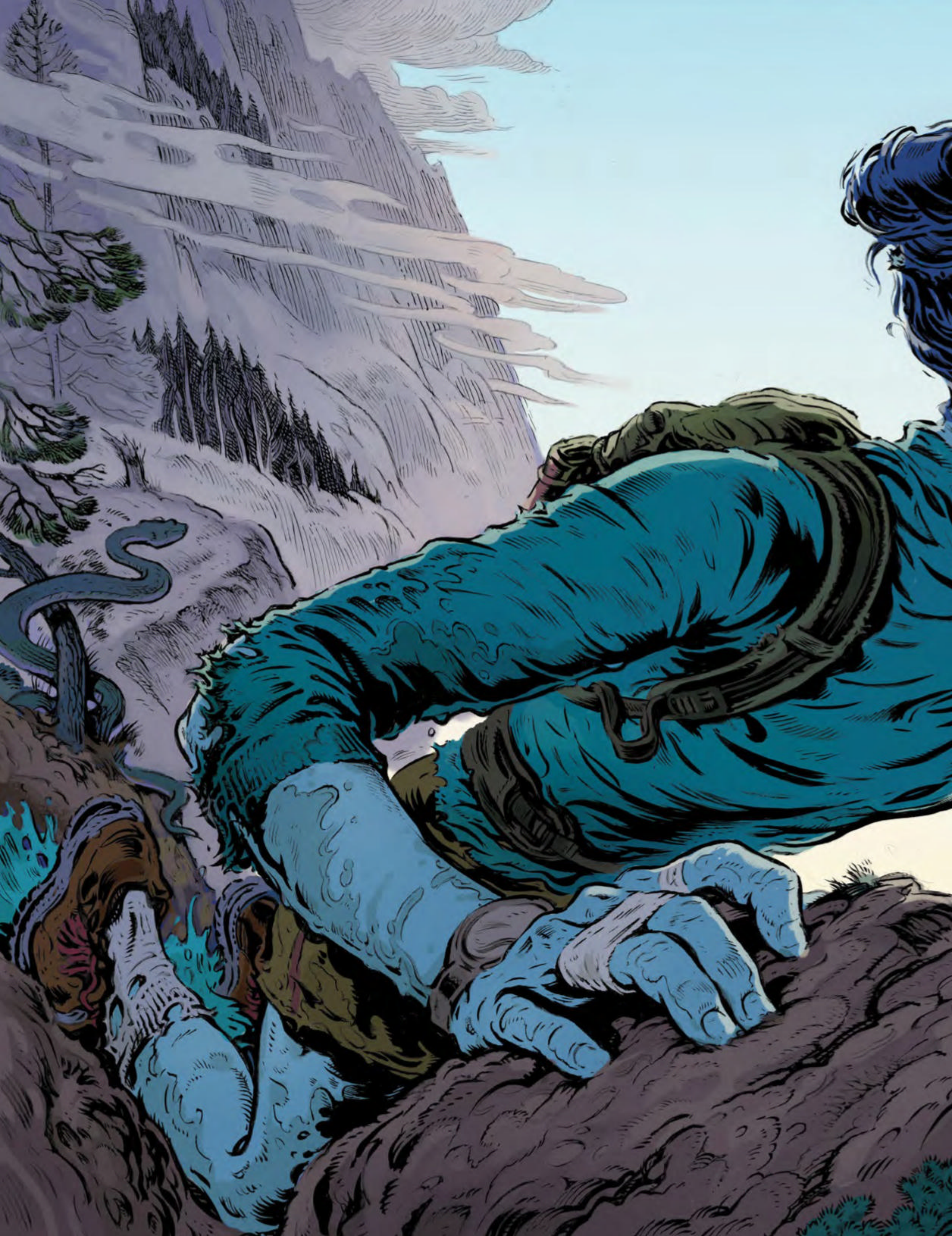
With a Who's Who of technical gear manufacturers opening storefronts on Boulder's Pearl Street and in LoDo over the past few years, perhaps it's surprising to see a Who's *That?* top our list. But here's the deal: At Boulder Sports Recycler, which debuted new (palatial) digs in East Boulder last fall, you can outfit your gear closet for a fraction of the cost. "We don't want to price people out of getting outside," says Mick Tresemer, a longtime seasonal employee who bought the place in 2017. The 10,000-plus-square-foot warehouse is split into two sides: On one, customers browse name-brand (think: Arc'teryx, Patagonia, and Outdoor Research) used equipment and duds. Items are priced on MSRP, quality, and shelf life, among other considerations. In April, a Sierra Designs Electron 2 backpacking tent (originally $260) was listed for $125. The price tag informed interested parties that the cost would drop to $75 in June, $37.50 in September, and, finally, $12.50 in October. On the other side of the store, customers may consign their own gear or have it repaired. "It's a gear shop, repair shop, and consignment shop, but more than any of that, it's a community," Tresemer says. "We treat everyone here like family." *—MH*

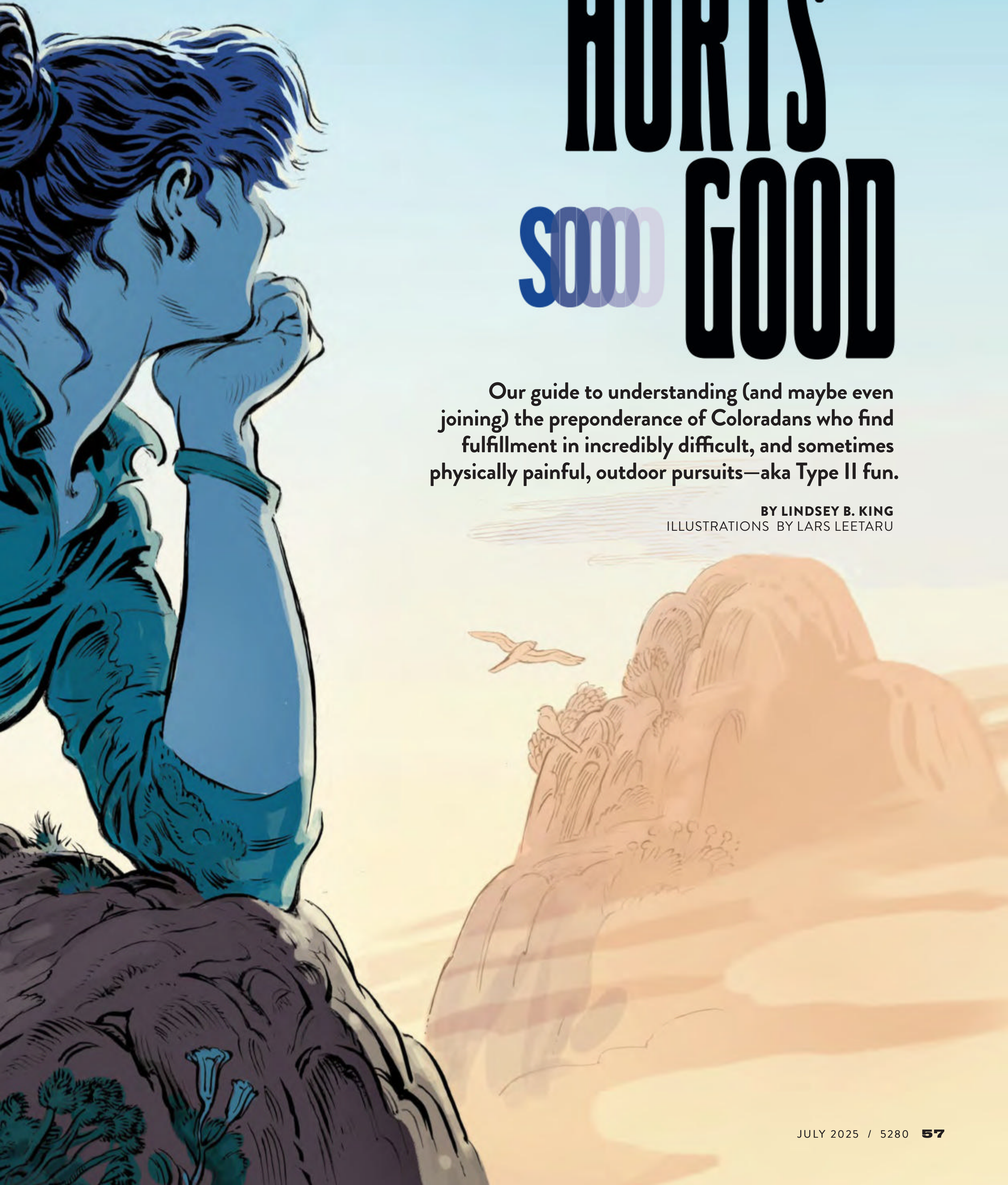
TOP KID-FOCUSED ENTERTAINMENT

Kids Wonder

In 2016, Cameron Swen got a homework assignment. Tasked with creating a mock business plan while pursuing his MBA, the father of four designed an indoor play space where kids could simultaneously get their zoomies out and learn social-emotional skills. Swen and his wife, Kristi, a former teacher, thought the project showed promise, and the couple self-funded Centennial's Kids Wonder three years later. Unlike playgrounds designed to simply tucker tots out, the Swens built an entire miniature city in the 13,000-square-foot space, complete with a post office, grocery store, and library. There, little ones are encouraged to interact, communicate, and flex their imaginations. (There are spots that'll prepare your kiddos for a no-fuss bedtime, though: Crawling babies can safely tumble in the padded infant area, and older children can careen around in the bounce house room. Parents can unwind with beer or wine served from the on-site cafe.) The Swens are also committed to making Kids Wonder inclusive to children of all abilities. Afternoons are kept quiet for those with sensory needs, the space is wheelchair accessible, and the owners invite pediatric physical therapists to use the facility for their therapy sessions. "We don't see ourselves as just a transactional place," Kristi says. "If kids are enjoying themselves and parents are engaged, then everyone in our society benefits." *—BO*

locken Hotel **Hike Within 90 Minutes of Denver** Rainbow Lake, Frisco **Local Outdoor Gear Store** Feral **Park** Washington Park **Ski Resort** Vail Ski Resort **Yoga Studio** Better Buzz Yoga





HURTS SOOOOO GOOD

Our guide to understanding (and maybe even joining) the preponderance of Coloradans who find fulfillment in incredibly difficult, and sometimes physically painful, outdoor pursuits—aka Type II fun.

BY LINDSEY B. KING
ILLUSTRATIONS BY LARS LEETARU

Seth K. Hughes

THERE'S A STEEP, ONE-MILE SECTION OF THE SNEFFELS TRAVERSE—A 29.4-MILE, FIVE-DAY HUT-TO-HUT TREK THAT BEGINS AT 10,676-FOOT LAST DOLLAR PASS NEAR TELLURIDE—THAT HAD ABSOLUTELY NO SYMPATHY FOR ME.

It smirked at my hot tears and laughed at my burning lungs. My aching shoulder was not its concern either. I hated the trail's long, belabored switchbacks and could've sworn the dirt path was exerting an unusually strong gravitational pull on my 30-pound pack. I was miserable.

Many years later, though, I have to dive deep into my mental reservoir to recall how I actually felt on the brutal ascent, because what I remember most from that short section of the Sneffels Traverse (*pictured*) isn't the 900 feet of elevation gain. Instead, my brain skips right over the physical torture and returns to the summit of Wilson Creek, where my eyes feasted on a majestic view of 14,155-foot Mt. Sneffels while I scarfed the most delicious salami and cheese I'd ever tasted.

There are several terms that describe this phenomenon, including selective memory and the halo effect, a cognitive bias in which a positive impression overrides a negative one, leaving behind a rose-colored glow. No matter what you call it, the point is that the human brain is a wacky yet powerful thing capable of not only diminishing the way we remember discomfort but also simultaneously using the distorted recollection to convince us that we can, in fact, do very hard things.

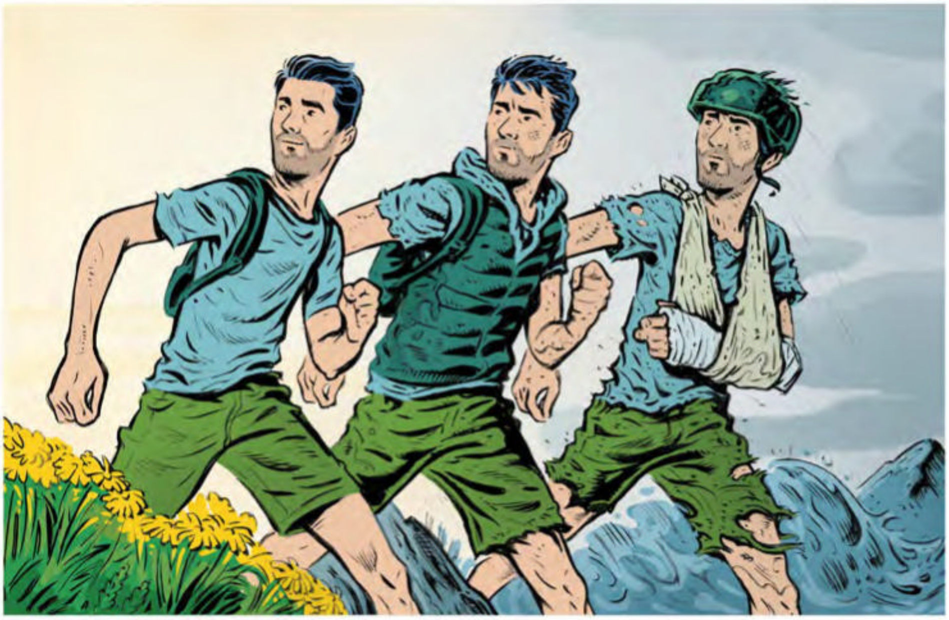
Judging by the number of people climbing 14,000-foot peaks, plying long-distance hiking trails, running ultramarathons, and cycling over mountain passes in the summer as well as backcountry skiing, cross-country skiing, and ice climbing in the winter, Coloradans seem to have particularly short memories when it comes to pain. That, or they have come to understand the benefits of so-called Type II Fun, one of three categories of merriment described in 1985 by Rainer Newberry, a mountaineer and geology professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who created the Fun Scale.

While Newberry didn't necessarily intend for the Fun Scale—which essentially analyzes the fun-to-pain ratio—to be applied to outdoor escapades, the terminology and definitions he outlined have been widely adopted by recreationists, including here in Colorado, where opportunities for Type II Fun abound. Let us show you how and why—and where to begin your adventure.

CLASSIFYING ENJOYMENT

Breaking down the Fun Scale in the Centennial State.

Rainer Newberry never published his Fun Scale—or even wrote it down—but others have done it for him over the years, including Boulder's Matt Samet, the author of 2011's *Climbing Dictionary: Mountaineering Slang, Terms, Neologisms & Lingo*. Samet says he first heard of the Fun Scale in the early 2000s, and by the time he began writing his reference book, the terminology had become widely used. To include it in his pages, he enlisted help from well-known Estes Park climber Kelly Cordes, who heard about the Fun Scale from Peter Haeussler, a geologist who'd gotten it directly from the source during a 1993 scouting trip in southeast Alaska. Below, our interpretation of Newberry's Fun Scale, tweaked for Colorado.



James Lucas

TYPE I FUN

DEFINE IT

Easy-breezy, truly enjoyable activities that are delightful when they're actually happening

TRY IT

Drinking craft brews on Denver Beer Co.'s sunny LoHi patio, knee-deep powder skiing at Vail, a zero-elevation-gain wildflower hike in Crested Butte

TYPE II FUN

DEFINE IT

Physically and mentally challenging pursuits that are typically much more fun in retrospect, like when you tell the story at the bar three weeks later

TRY IT

Climbing one of Colorado's 54 fourteeners, hiking the 160-mile Collegiate Peaks Loop, alpine touring in the San Juans

TYPE III FUN

DEFINE IT

Endeavors that usually start out as Type II Fun, but because of circumstances—a bad fall, a wrong turn—morph into scenarios that are not fun while they're happening and never become fun in hindsight

TRY IT

Don't

EARN YOUR SPURS

Why Boulder-based rock climber Matt Samet digs Type II Fun.

Most people do the Grand Traverse—this one's in Wyoming's Teton Range—in two or three days. It's 15.5 miles of trail plus 2.5 miles of alpine climbing and has 12,000 feet of elevation gain. On a topo map, it kinda looks like an EKG. But it was 2002, and I was with Rolando Garibotti, who'd set the speed record for the traverse in 2000. So, we did it in one day. If I'd done it myself it could've turned into Type III Fun—I was dehydrated, my legs were heavy, and at one point we had to hunker down in a talus field because of a thunderstorm. In that moment, I was tired and scared and cold. Today, I can look back on that day and say to myself, "Wow, that was cool."

The thing about Type II Fun is that it's not a cultivated experience. If you go to Great Wolf Lodge—a hotel with an indoor water park in Colorado Springs—with your kids, it's a lot of fun, solid Type I Fun. For $60 to $80, you get to have thrills on waterslides, and it's a safe, no-consequences environment. But you don't feel like you deserved the fun. You're experiencing pleasure, but you didn't earn it. Same thing with going to a climbing gym. It's mostly Type I Fun. However, if I go out to the Flatirons in Boulder and work on a first ascent, I'm earning it. I might spend days bolting and figuring out moves and then days falling to the ground. When I succeed, though, there's a much deeper sense of satisfaction. That's Type II Fun. —**AS TOLD TO LBK**

THEM'S THE BREAKS

When Type II Fun turns into Type III Fun—with disastrous results.

Otina Fox knows one thing for sure: If you undertake enough Type II Fun, you're certain to experience Type III at some point. The 48-year-old Boulderite learned about Type II Fun on a backpacking trip through New York's Adirondacks when she was in college. Although she battled mightily with her equipment—specifically, an ill-fitting 1950s external-frame pack that had been her grandmother's—during the hike, she fell in love with the feeling of being self-reliant in the outdoors. "I remember thinking, *I want to do that again*," Fox says, "*but next time I'll be smarter about it*."

Since then, Fox has accomplished all manner of outdoor exploits, including summiting all of Colorado's fourteeners in the summer and bootpacking up and skiing down most of them in the winter. However, she has not always been able to sidestep the pitfalls that can turn a stoke-worthy adventure into an excursion you wish you could forget.

On June 2, 2014, Fox had alpine-toured her way up to the top of a sweet line on 14,163-foot Maroon Peak near Aspen. Partway down the run, Fox learned why this mountain, along with its sister peak, are often called the Deadly Bells: Her skis clipped a chunk of ice, and as she spun, one ski went under the other and her binding failed to release. When she finally came to a stop on the 45-degree slope, her left tibia was in five pieces and her fibula had sustained a spiral fracture. "It was a 10 out of 10 on the pain scale," Fox says. "I have my wilderness first-aid certification. I knew it was all bone, and there was no bleeding—but I needed to get off the mountain." After pressing the SOS button on her SPOT device, Fox and her skiing partner splinted her leg and "butt-scooted" partway down the mountain to a place where a Black Hawk helicopter could touch down.

Fox broke the same leg two more times while skiing in less than four years. She politely calls each instance Type III Fun and acknowledges that the third break also shattered her confidence. Instead of giving up on risky adventures, though, Fox recovered and then worked on her technique to avoid future injury. "Why do I keep doing this?" Fox says. "Because there's nothing like ski mountaineering. Ninety-nine percent of the population will never understand it or be able to do it, but I can. It's the ultimate thrill, the ultimate freedom."

Type II Fun is also, Fox says, the ultimate lesson in perseverance. Being able to get through the suck to the delayed gratification is the lasting takeaway. "Doing Type II Fun has helped me in new jobs, with new supervisors, in new environments," she says. "It makes me stronger and know I can rely on myself."

STEP BY STEP

Why Littleton-based mountaineer Luis Benitez digs Type II Fun.

I've been on Everest seven times—I've summited six times. The first time was the scariest, because I was helping guide Erik Weihenmayer, a blind climber, up the peak. Well before we even made a summit push, he and I were walking into Camp 1 when he stepped into a tiny crevasse. We both fell, and my trekking pole hit him in the face, giving him a bloody nose. I remember looking up at this gigantic mountain in the distance and thinking, *How are we gonna get this done?*

The answer is grit and tenacity. There's been a death of grit and tenacity in our society, and I think it has a lot to do with the rise of technology. The more electronic our lives become, the more we have to seek out Type II Fun. It helps us learn about ourselves. It gives us goals for doing something that no one, including you, thinks you can do. And then you do it—and that translates to other aspects of your life.

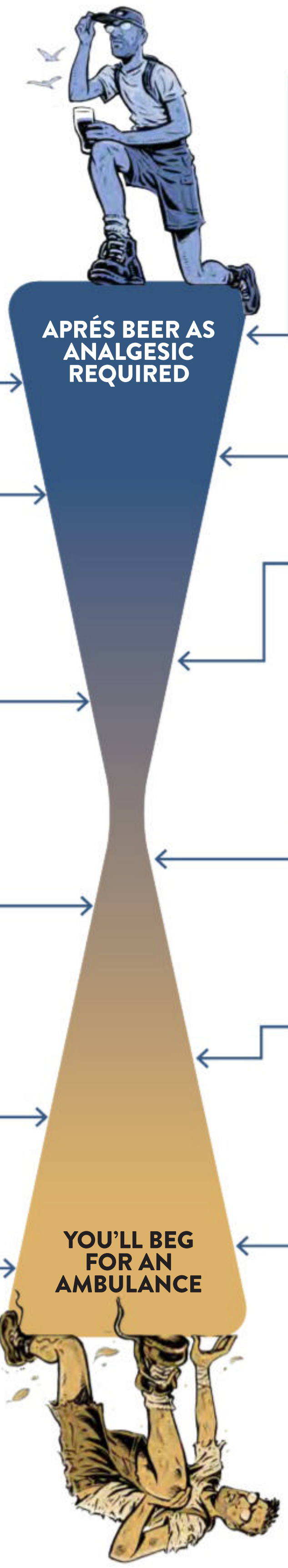
And it doesn't have to be Everest (*pictured*). There's this place called Wham Ridge in the south San Juan Mountains. It's maybe the most remote, rugged range in Colorado, and you have to really work to get to this 3,000-foot slab of granite. It's a mini-expedition. The sense of remoteness really drives the Type II feeling. Help can be days away. But it's how you react and respond to those external factors that are pressuring you that shows you what you can do. You realize something might be hard, but you think, *I can handle this*, because, well, you can.

—AS TOLD TO LBK

Courtesy of Bill Middlebrook (Otina Fox portrait & skiing); Didrik Johnck (Luis Benitez)

THE SUFFER SPECTRUM

Colorado's most epic opportunities for Type II Fun, ranked by the agony they deliver.


APRÉS BEER AS ANALGESIC REQUIRED
YOU'LL BEG FOR AN AMBULANCE

401 Trail
One of the most famous mountain bike trails in the birthplace of mountain biking, the 401 gives advanced riders steep grades, switchbacks, root drops, and amazing views of Crested Butte's world-renowned wildflowers.

Manitou Incline
A StairMaster from hell, the Manitou Incline is a flight of steps (2,744 of them, to be exact) that rises 2,000 feet in only one mile and has sections with a 68 percent grade. Don't look down.

Colfax Marathon
It's a marathon, so it's stupidly difficult, but at least it takes the scenic route: through Empower Field, into a working firehouse, around Sloan's Lake, and into City Park near the Denver Zoo.

Tomichi Route
This one-mile draw plummets 1,960 feet into the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. It's a scree- and poison-ivy-filled nightmare on the way down (which takes 90 minutes) ***and*** on the way up (which takes three times as long as the descent).

The Numbers
This section of the Arkansas River is commonly considered the best Class IV white-water run in the state, but you'll need to paddle hard and stay in the boat, especially during high runoff, when an eight-foot wave forms at rapid No. 5 and major carnage occurs on rapids No. 4 and No. 5.

The Maiden
In a remote area of the Flatirons, a blade of rock called the Maiden juts skyward and offers what looks like one of the area's most implausible summits, even for veteran rock climbers: the West Overhang, with a pitch of 5.11.

Triple Bypass
Three mountain passes. Nearly 120 miles. And 10,800 feet of elevation gain. There's a lot of pedaling—and huffing and puffing—in this epic cycling race.

Grand Traverse Ski
Held annually each March, this point-to-point race covers 40 miles of backcountry terrain between Mt. Crested Butte and Aspen. Skiers gain nearly 7,000 feet in elevation—and, oh yeah, the start gun goes off at midnight to lessen the avalanche risk.

Colorado Trail
The CT—one of the country's premier long-distance trails—comprises 567 miles of footpath between Denver and Durango. The route winds through six wilderness areas and over eight mountain ranges, climbing 90,000 vertical feet along the way.

Leadville Trail 100 Run
The so-called Race Across the Sky is the OG ultra in the Centennial State. Typically, less than 50 percent of starters finish the route—which primarily follows the Colorado Trail—within the 30-hour time limit.

Northeast Ridge of Capitol Peak
The most difficult standard route of any 14,000-foot mountain in Colorado, this way takes mountaineers over the Knife Edge, a 150-foot catwalk that has circa 2,000-foot drops on either side.

Hardrock 100
A grueling, 102.5-mile ultramarathon held in the San Juan Mountains, Hardrock has a total elevation change of 66,394 feet and an average elevation above 11,000 feet.

HIGHS & LOWS

Inside the mental roller coaster of running an ultramarathon.

Sarah Banks, a Louisville resident and one of this magazine's photo editors, has suffered through a handful of trail-based races longer than 26 miles. Here, the 33-year-old breaks down some of the thoughts that ran through her mind when she completed the Silverton Ultra Dirty 55K—a race that followed the famed Colorado Trail and boasted 22,500 feet of elevation gain—in 2019, beginning with training and ending at the finish line.

⟼ Months before the race

"In trying to get 'time on your feet'—in this case, roughly 50 miles a week—you begin sacrificing time with friends and family. You realize you are choosing something over your other priorities, making yourself unrelatable to a lot of people, and choosing to be with a very select crew who can run like you can."

⟼ Morning of the race

"You wake up at 3 a.m. and even after all the training, you wonder if you should just stay in bed, because if you get up, it's just gonna be a big suck."

⟼ Start line

"The start line is both electric and underwhelming. Mostly it's just lots of people in really bright, ridiculous gear—stupid-looking hats, tall socks, short shorts—who are all queuing up for the restroom to get out the nervous trots. Also, when it starts, it's pretty anticlimactic, because nobody is sprinting."

⟼ Mile 20

"The wheels started to come off here. Even though it was August, there was still snow, which made parts of the trail muddy—so muddy that one of my feet got stuck. I stopped, took a deliberate step with the other foot to try to escape, and lost my shoe. Then, when I tried to extricate my other foot, I lost the other shoe. This was the first time that day that I thought: *This race is bullshit.* It's also the first time I noticed a storm brewing on the horizon."

⟼ Mile 26

"After reminding myself that *I* chose this and that it is supposed to be fun, I kept going and was actually enjoying the views of the surrounding mountains—until I fell. My knee hit a rock in that way that makes you feel like you might vomit and shit yourself at the same time. Neither happened, but damn, it was painful. I thought about throwing in the towel at the next aid station but decided it was actually easier to keep going than to get a transport back into town."

⟼ Mile who knows?

"The storm was really brewing as I hit one of the steepest sections of trail I've ever hiked. But I met a trail friend: one of those mythical creatures you meet up with for a short amount of time, share complaints with, talk to about why you're both doing this, cheer each other on, and then never see again. At one point we hit a snowfield and sat down together on our butts and slid down. It was seriously so much fun."

⟼ 12,694 feet

"At the high point of the course, I found myself alone and took a selfie. I look slightly unhinged, but the 360-degree views of the San Juans were spectacular, and even with a huge storm bearing down on me, I felt alive!"

⟼ Finish line and everything after

"My stepdaughter saw me coming and ran me in. Well, she ran, and I slogged. I finished in about nine hours. I felt acute soreness for a few days, but it felt like earned soreness because I knew it had come from having done something really cool."

From left: Ben Conners; Sarah Banks

CONFIDENCE BOOSTER

We spoke with Pagosa Springs–based outdoor survival instructor Jessie Krebs, an Air Force veteran and owner of OWLS Skills, about the benefits of Type II Fun, how to prepare for challenging adventures, and why sometimes it's important to simply take a breath.

Courtesy of MasterClass.com

***5280*: You're a former SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) instructor and a one-time wilderness therapy guide: Why should people do difficult things outdoors?**
Jessie Krebs: It's empowering. It sands away the mask we put out into the universe. We all have something we want to keep hidden. We don't feel secure. We don't want to be vulnerable. Being in a wilderness environment helps unmask us, because it doesn't care. The wilderness doesn't care what you think or what you look like. It's hard to fake who you are, going through hard things. It teaches you about yourself.

What would you tell someone who feels too intimidated to even try?
Preparation is key to feeling safe. In my OWLS classes, I work mostly with marginalized people, taking them out into the woods and teaching them basics of how to get out of a situation gone wrong. So, for example, what should you do if your car slides off the road or you're in the backcountry somewhere and you were just planning on a dayhike, and now the weather has turned or you twisted an ankle, and you're stranded? My mission is to try to help people feel safer in the wilderness so they can go out there and connect with it.

By marginalized communities, you mean women?
Yes, one part of my business is a women-only school: Outdoorsy Women Learning Survival Skills. Women are underrepresented in the outdoors because, in my view, if you look at history, if you look at our puritanical background, women were kept in the kitchen and were making babies and raising babies, and that was their job. We've kept that in our culture for a long time, forgetting that in a lot of ancestral cultures, women also gathered food, skinned animals, and even hunted. We need to remember that it wasn't just men who survived for millennia on this planet in the wilderness.

What survival tenets should a Type II Fun newbie of any gender know before leaving home?
Most important, they need to know that you should never go out into the woods anticipating your adventure will just be a dayhike, because when something goes wrong and you have to overnight outside, you're gonna wish you'd carried what you need—based on your experience level and your knowledge—to get some sleep and stay alive for at least one night in the wilderness. They should also know about signaling methods and how to use them in case they need to attract the attention of search and rescue. Your primary mission in a survival situation, if things have gone wrong and now you want to get home, is to signal. It's not to build a fire, not to build a shelter, not to make yourself at home. It's to get someone's attention.

That's a truly scary situation, but what would you tell people who start to get angsty about their abilities to finish a trail or even just sleep in a tent?
Breathe. There are lots of methods we can use to help us calm down, but before you can even use them, you need to *recognize* that you're anxious, that you're not feeling well, that you're stressed and overwhelmed. So being able to understand that and recognize that is the first thing. Then breathe slowly. Make your exhales much longer than your inhales. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for relaxation. So just sit down, chill out, and breathe slowly.

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Combining relatively easy Type II Fun with always enjoyable Type I Fun (in this case, après) can help nudge newbies into the wild.

GET YOUR HEART PUMPING BY...	↦	THEN REPLENISH THOSE CALORIES WITH...
Hiking the West Slopes standard route of 14,066-foot Mt. Bierstadt, one of the least challenging fourteeners in the state.	↦	The beef burger with all the fixings—plus fries—paired with the Italian Pilsner at Idaho Springs' Westbound & Down Brewing Company.
Pedaling your road steed straight uphill on iconic Lookout Mountain, a 4.5-mile (one way) grind with 1,280 feet of elevation gain and an average grade of 5.4 percent.	↦	A round of beers on Mountain Toad Brewing's picnic-table-strewn patio, where you can also nosh on whatever nibbles are available at the food truck of the day.
Whitewater rafting the Royal Gorge section of the Arkansas River with an outfitter like River Runners, which offers half- and full-day options for seriously splashy, white-knuckle-style Class IV action.	↦	One of 45 flavors of crispy chicken wings and a cold one—maybe a Tsunami Summer Ale—at World's End Brewing Company in Cañon City.
Slogging seven miles up Hidden Dune—at 742 feet tall, it's the tallest sand dune in North America—and back down again at Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve.	↦	The local sausage sampler, a Bavarian hot pretzel, and a brewed-right-there-in-Alamosa beer at the San Luis Valley Brewing Company.
Donning some armor and a helmet before jumping on Winter Park's lift to access the resort's Trestle Bike Park, a downhill mountain biking paradise with 40 miles of dirt trails. (Newbies can take a half- or full-day guided lesson with a bike park instructor.)	↦	Margs and fish tacos at Pepe Osaka's FishTaco & Tequila Bar, a Winter Park staple for more than a decade.

Don Beveridge

AROUND THE RIVERBEND

Why Glenwood Springs–based whitewater kayaker Darcy Gaechter digs Type II Fun.

I'm a relatively good natural athlete, but I was really bad at kayaking when I first tried it after high school in Aspen. I was with all these guys who were way better, and it was embarrassing. But it also intrigued me, because it was the first time I met something I really sucked at. It's a difficult sport. When you're on land with your head above water, you can try to learn and visualize, but then in the water you invert yourself and you can't breathe, and it's really an unnatural thing to practice. Everything about it is stupid and counterintuitive. But now I love it, and it has taught me many things.

My biggest takeaway has been how to overcome adversity on the river and then learning how to apply that to life. Being a dedicated kayaker means having mental resilience. You have to get to know yourself—what do good nerves feel like, and what do bad nerves feel like? What is normal scared and what is too scared to think straight? Is my heart beating too fast? If so and I can't calm down, then I shouldn't run this rapid. So, I learned to take some deep breaths and give myself three seconds, even though that sometimes feels like way too much time to take. Being a woman, I've also learned that people will question whether I'm good enough to be on a certain river. I'm short and skinny and don't look tough; it's easy for an initial judgment of me not to be favorable. And that makes you question yourself. But after 28 years, I've learned to ignore them, because I know I should be here. **—AS TOLD TO LBK**

LONGING FOR LONGS

Heeding the siren song of a Front Range fourteener.

The weather window was looking good. It was August 2024, and almost on a whim, I decided to climb Longs Peak, the broad-shouldered, flat-topped sentinel of the Front Range. It may have been impulsive, but I wasn't entirely unprepared: I'd trained for and planned to hike 14,259-foot Longs one year earlier, in September 2023, only to be thwarted by a late-summer snowstorm that hit on my summit-push day.

Rationally, I knew those kinds of things happened all the time. Emotionally, I was sort of devastated. It was as if the mountain was trying to tell me something, and what it seemed to be saying was, *Hey, old man, maybe this isn't your thing.* There was a good chance, I thought, Longs was right.

When I turned 50 five months later, I made plans to do some hiking that upcoming summer—but Longs wasn't on the list. I did Rustler's Gulch and Scarp Ridge near Crested Butte and made my way to Rocky Mountain National Park in early August to hike to the Loch, Lake Haiyaha, and Dream Lake. I had hit Rocky on a rainy afternoon, but on the way down from Lake Haiyaha, the rain stopped, and the clouds broke. As I was descending, I turned around to look out over Glacier Gorge, and there it was: Longs Peak. The clouds draping the upper part of the mountain looked like priestly vestments.

In that moment, it seemed as if the mountain was speaking to me again, and this time it was saying, *If you're going to give me a shot, you should do it soon.* So, I listened.

August 30 was shaping up to be a bluebird day, so even though I wasn't as fit as I'd been a year earlier, I decided I'd make a solo attempt. It was cool and calm at the trailhead at 2:15 a.m. when I set out, save for the other crazy souls who'd strapped on headlamps to trudge up this giant rock. I was doing mostly OK as I paced myself over the first six miles, but by the time I got to the Boulderfield, I felt awful. My legs were shaky, and I had mild nausea and a headache. I sat down and had some water, some Pepto-Bismol, and some ibuprofen. After 45 minutes, I decided I would hike to the iconic Keyhole—and then turn around. I just didn't think I was up for the hard part of Longs.

But when I reached the Keyhole, stepped over the ridgeline onto the west flank of Longs, and gazed into Glacier Gorge, something happened. I was jubilant. I felt renewed. Clearly, adrenaline was doing what adrenaline does, which is make you feel like Superman even if you're a tired, middle-aged mountaineer wannabe. A couple of hours later, after crawling up the rock slabs of the Homestretch, I found myself on the summit.

As I peered down at Chasm Lake, I experienced a profound sense of accomplishment and joy: Longs was my 10th fourteener summit. But as anyone who's climbed to the top of a mountain knows, I was only halfway home. While I worked my way a little more than seven miles back down the mountain, I felt several things: aching thighs, bruised toes, utter exhaustion, and a sincere awe that I'd chosen, very intentionally, to do this to myself.

When asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, mountaineer George Mallory famously replied, "Because it's there." Although his answer feels snide, it's not. I climbed Longs Peak because it's there, because I look at it every day, and because it was speaking to me for reasons I may not ever fully understand. I also climbed it because I wanted to see if I could. The answer was yes. –**GEOFF VAN DYKE** ▲

From left: Courtesy of Geoff Van Dyke; Chiranjib Ghorai/Getty Images

RIGHT PLACE

★

BY ALAN PRENDERGAST

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION
BY C.J. BURTON

RIGHT TIME

★

The Mountain States Legal Foundation has been using the courts to keep big government at bay for nearly 50 years. Now, with Trump in power, do conservatives still need the Lakewood-based law firm?

Like any attorney worth his wing tips, William Trachman under-stands the importance of telling a good story.

As general counsel for the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a public-interest law firm based in Colorado that frequently sues the federal government for meddling in Americans' lives and livelihoods, he knows that it's the emotional and financial ordeals of his clients, rather than the legal nuances of a case, that are likely to draw public attention. And a compelling narrative that embodies a constitutional principle—the right to free speech or to bear arms or to equal protection under the law—is even better.

"I'm the Constitution's lawyer," Trachman says. "We're always going to try to tell a story with our cases: how someone who is sympathetic was injured by a law gone wrong and has a constitutional right to go to court to fight it. All our cases involve stories of people, not just us as lawyers."

Launched in 1977 with seed money from beer magnate Joseph Coors, Mountain States has been a fixture of Colorado's legal scene for nearly half a century. Yet the nonprofit remains better known in Washington, D.C., policy circles than at home, where it's kept a relatively low profile—except when its crusades become too controversial to ignore. The most recent example of the small firm's big reach involves one of its longest-running cases: a 2015 class-action lawsuit against the Federal Aviation Administration, filed on behalf of hundreds of white plaintiffs who claim that they were rejected for air traffic controller jobs because of a hiring process that was rigged to favor other racial groups, in violation of federal civil rights laws.

The suit dragged on through three administrations without attracting much notice. But in January, nine days into the second Trump presidency, a midair collision between a military helicopter and an American Airlines jet in Washington killed 67 people—the deadliest domestic air disaster in more than 20 years. Hours later, President Donald Trump accused the Biden and Obama administrations of running the FAA "right into the ground," insinuating that the crash was the result of federal diversity, equity, and inclusion hiring programs. "They actually came out with a directive, 'too white,'" Trump said. "And we want the people who are competent."

Vice President J.D. Vance echoed Trump's remarks and referred pointedly to the Mountain States lawsuit. "You have many hundreds of people suing the government because they would like to be air traffic controllers, but they were turned away because of the color of their skin," he said. "That policy ends under Donald Trump's leadership."

The circumstances of the crash are still under investigation; preliminary reports indicate there may have been multiple causes, from helicopter pilot error to a shortage of personnel in the tower to communication issues. In media interviews Trachman did in the

PORTRAITS BY MATT NAGER

wake of the tragedy, he was careful not to draw a direct link between FAA hiring policies and the crash, but he acknowledges that the administration's finger-pointing "drove a lot of traffic to our organization."

The lawsuit is now going through mediation, and the outcome could have far-reaching implications. If the two sides agree to a settlement, "it will create a deterrent effect for the next administration," Trachman says. If the mediation fails to reach a resolution and Mountain States is victorious in further court action, the case could set a precedent. "We'll have a court decision that says you can't racially gerrymander your workforce by tinkering with your application test," Trachman says. "And that will apply not just to federal agencies but to every employer."

The second Trump term would seem to be an auspicious time for the legal warriors at Mountain States. But presidents come and go, along with their flurries of executive orders. During Democratic administrations, Mountain States has been a hectoring voice in the wilderness; during Republican ones, it's served as a recruitment pool for cabinet members and top advisers. Through it all, operating out of a nondescript office park in Lakewood, the organization has pursued its own agenda for America, marked by an exuberant embrace of private property rights, limited government, drill-baby-drill energy policy, anti-anti-racist activism, and similar objectives. Mountain States hasn't always prevailed, but it's been surprisingly effective at rallying support for its constitutional grievances, from hyperlocal public-school disputes to civil liberties battles that extend all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Unlike commercial law firms, Mountain States doesn't charge its clients for its services. In some instances, it may be awarded fees and costs in a successful court action, but most of its annual operating budget (the firm reported $4.3 million in expenditures in 2023) comes from corporations, foundations, and individuals whose identities the group declines to disclose, citing privacy concerns. One-time, five-figure contributions from the Independent Petroleum Association of America, the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation, and the Armstrong Foundation have surfaced in public records, but the firm's past and present leaders maintain that most of their funding comes in dribbles of a few hundred or a few thousand dollars from individuals who share their vision of personal freedom. According to data posted on its website, the average donation is $225.

"I feel blessed that people put that kind of faith in us," Trachman says. "I've seen the criticisms—that we are a stalking horse for Koch Industries. I have never spoken to Koch Industries in order to get a $5 million check. The fact that we have a unity of interests with some of the energy companies isn't a knock on our work. It just means we have an interest that's good for the country that happens to dovetail with interests that are good for the private companies."

As Trachman sees it, his mission is "expanding the blast radius" of Mountain States' wins by establishing precedents that help to curb an overreaching bureaucracy. "The goal is creating something to point to," he says, "that is going to survive us and create binding law."

IN THE SUMMER OF 1971, corporate lawyer Lewis Powell fired off a hush-hush memo to a friend at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, declaring that the American way of life was under "broad attack" from left-wing extremists, ranging from Marxist academics and the Black Panthers to consumer advocate Ralph Nader and journalists at the major television networks. Powell, whose clients included big tobacco companies, wrote it was time for corporate interests to fight back "in all political arenas," enlisting their own teams of scholars, speakers, attorneys, and others to defend the free enterprise system.

President Richard Nixon appointed Powell to the U.S. Supreme Court a few weeks later. Over the years, pundits have alternately pointed to the Powell Memorandum as a blueprint for plutocracy and dismissed it as a quaint rant, but it's clear that it resonated with several influential backers of conservative causes. One was Joe Coors, whose family brewery business in Golden had its share of tussles with unions and bureaucrats. In 1973, Coors became one of the founding funders of the Heritage Foundation, a pro-business think tank based in Washington, D.C. Initially modest in scope, Heritage has since become one of the most powerful policy groups on the right, a clearinghouse for ideas on how to restructure government and dismantle federal regulation of the private sector. Its periodically updated *Mandate for Leadership* policy guides are widely regarded as playbooks for Republican administrations. (The latest version is better known as Project 2025; Trump has attempted to distance himself from the 992-page document while implementing many of its recommendations.)

Not content with bankrolling a think tank, Coors also invested in a boutique, public-interest law firm that could challenge government policies in court, donating $25,000 in startup funds to the Mountain States Legal Foundation. A group called the National Legal Center for the Public Interest (which has since merged with the American Enterprise Institute, another conservative think tank) chipped in an additional $50,000. Originally, Republican backers hoped to establish a string of regional firms overseen by a national organization, but the local groups each had their own leadership and fundraising concerns—and their own hot-button issues. Some positioned themselves as champions of gun rights or defenders of free speech in the marketplace and on campus. Mountain States prioritized natural resource and environmental regulation battles with the federal government, which controls nearly a third of the land in Colorado and New Mexico and much more in other Western states.

"I DON'T USE THE WORDS 'DEMOCRATS' AND 'REPUBLICANS.' IT'S 'LIBERALS' AND 'AMERICANS.'"

★

From left: **William Trachman inside Mountain States' Lakewood office; firm co-funder Joe Coors with his then-wife Holly at the National Western Stock Show in the early 1980s**

Eric Bakke/*The Denver Post* via Getty Images

Coors' choice to lead Mountain States was James Watt, an attorney who had grown up on the high plains of eastern Wyoming before spending much of his career at various government posts inside D.C.'s Beltway. In the firm's early days, Watt set about filing "friend of the court" briefs in other firms' cases, the kind of cases that attracted donor support from right of center: an Idaho plumber who refused to let government inspectors into his shop without a warrant, an attack on affirmative action at the University of Colorado School of Law. Soon Mountain States was initiating its own lawsuits, targeting the Environmental Protection Agency, the Sierra Club, and other foes. (One early case challenged the EPA's authority to regulate air pollution—aka the notorious "brown cloud"—in Colorado.) In its first four years, the foundation's annual budget grew from $194,000 to $1.2 million.

At the urging of Coors and other influential Westerners, President Ronald Reagan asked Watt to head the Department of the Interior in 1980. The so-called Sagebrush Rebellion—a political revolt by mining, ranching, and fossil-fuel interests over Carter-era environmental regulations that limited their access to millions of acres of public lands—was in full bloom. Reagan vowed to ramp up oil and gas production, as well as coal and water projects, but retooling a bureaucracy as ponderous and politically charged as the Interior Department was no easy task. Watt was a polarizing figure in the debate, given to intemperate remarks about "extreme environmentalists" and their plot to "weaken America" by blocking energy production in wilderness areas. (Another Watt zinger: "I don't use the words 'Democrats' and 'Republicans.' It's 'liberals' and 'Americans.'") His combativeness alienated moderate elements in Congress, as did the fact that he had been the driving force behind Mountain States, which, according to a *Rocky Mountain Magazine* reporter, had "the reputation of being anticonsumer, antifeminist, antigovernment, antiblack, and above all, antienvironmentalist."

Watt's stormy tenure at the Interior Department was cut short by an insensitive remark—an off-the-cuff reference to what today might be called DEI. In a 1983 speech to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, he boasted of the diversity of an advisory panel he'd formed that had "every kind of mix you can have. I have a Black, I have a woman, two Jews, and a cripple." He resigned a few weeks later.

Watt's departure from the Interior Department seemed to take the steam out of the Sagebrush movement. (His fall from grace didn't end there; his subsequent work as a lobbyist led to perjury charges in 1995 and a guilty plea to a single misdemeanor count of withholding documents. He died two years ago at the age of 85.) It also took the national spotlight off his former law firm. Mountain States continued to attract bright and capable lawyers—including Gale Norton, who worked there as a senior attorney in the early 1980s and later became Colorado's attorney general and U.S. secretary of the interior under President George W. Bush—but the organization struggled to stay ahead of its bills.

MOUNTAIN STATES CALLED THE D.C. CRASH "A SOBERING REMINDER OF THE COST OF PLACING IDEOLOGY OVER EXPERTISE."

★

From left: Reagan National Airport shortly after an American Airlines flight collided with a U.S. Army helicopter; William Perry Pendley, Mountain States' former president and chief legal officer

Andrew Harnik/Getty Images

By the time William Perry Pendley was hired as the group's president and chief legal officer in 1989, Mountain States was on the verge of collapse. "I came in in March," Pendley recalls, "and we didn't know if it was going to make it through the summer."

Another Wyoming native, Pendley had met Watt in 1977, shortly after graduating from law school. He was Watt's attorney during the contentious confirmation hearings for the top job at the Interior Department and worked for him as a deputy assistant secretary for energy and minerals. He didn't linger there long after his mentor left: "I was seen as a Jim Watt guy," Pendley says now. But what might be considered a liability in Washington was regarded as an asset by Mountain States' board of directors as they attempted to put the operation back on firm ground.

Pendley believed the firm needed to take on more cases that ignited the passions of its donor base—or, as he puts it, "Better cases, more money. More money, better cases." Mountain States had developed a niche in natural resource issues across the West, but the typical case involved arcane land-use battles. The federal government would propose a new resource management plan, environmental groups would object, Mountain States would object to their objection, and so on. "It was important, but nobody cared about it," Pendley says. "My view was, *I'm going to take cases that involve real people who have real problems with the federal government*."

One of Pendley's first clients was John Shuler, a Montana sheepherder who was facing a massive federal fine for shooting an endangered grizzly bear that was preying on his flock. Pendley saw a story about the case in a newspaper, called up Shuler, and offered to represent him at no charge. After an eight-year legal battle, in 1998 a district court held that Shuler had acted in self-defense. The case drew national media attention and convinced Pendley he was on the right track. "[Shuler] became the poster boy for Endangered Species Act reform," he says.

Another early case began when Randy Pesh, a Colorado Springs subcontractor who supplied guardrails to road construction projects, walked into Pendley's office. Pesh had submitted the lowest bid for a project in southwest Colorado, but he'd lost the job to another company because of federal incentives that favored "disadvantaged" or minority-owned businesses. The case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which, in a 1995 landmark ruling, greatly restricted the ways the federal government could use racial classifications to further government interests.

The victory whetted Pendley's appetite for more flashpoint cases. "If there was something that involved an important constitutional right, that had the possibility of garnering national attention and getting to the Supreme Court of the United States, I took it," he says.

While suing the government is easy, winning isn't. Pendley was unsuccessful in his efforts to get the Supreme Court to hear the appeal of auto racing legend Bobby Unser, who was convicted of operating a snowmobile in Colorado's federally protected South San Juan Wilderness, despite the fact that Unser had been lost in a blizzard at the time and nearly died before finding help. But such cases still attracted press coverage and financial support. Pendley became the public face of the organization: a Sagebrush courtroom avenger decked out in cowboy boots and a gunslinger's horseshoe mustache.

Pendley's journey from the halls of government to a law firm dedicated to suing the government is hardly unique. Mountain States' current president and CEO, Cristen Wohlgemuth, was once a policy adviser to Rick Perry when he was the governor of Texas. Wohlgemuth also worked for three years with constitutional scholar John Eastman at the Claremont Institute—the same John Eastman who is now fighting possible disbarment over his efforts to block certification of the 2020 election results. Chip Mellor, a former Mountain States attorney, went on to launch the Institute for Justice, a Virginia-based public-interest firm focused on constitutional issues. Another alum, Clint Bolick, is now a justice on the Arizona Supreme Court.

After almost 30 years at the helm of Mountain States, Pendley stepped down in 2018 and returned to Washington, where he served as the acting director of the Bureau of Land Management under the first Trump administration. He remains a highly visible pot-stirrer in the debate over energy and public-lands policy, having written a chapter on the proposed revamping of the Department of the Interior for Heritage's Project 2025. Among the bolder moves Pendley recommended: scrapping Biden impediments to oil and gas leasing on federal lands, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; taking gray wolves and Yellowstone grizzlies off the endangered species list; and trimming the size of national monuments in Maine and Oregon. A Sierra Club analysis of the chapter prior to the 2024 election noted it proposed dozens of actions "that a future president could take to cripple climate action, remove wildlife protections, and curtail outdoor recreation."

It wasn't the first time Pendley's thoughts on public lands had drawn consternation. In a 2016 article, he argued that the federal government has "a constitutional duty to dispose of its land holdings." Pendley says his position has been misinterpreted by critics as a call to sell off national parks to developers, when he was merely making a case that the federal government has the authority to turn over properties to state control. But that position isn't shared by his former law firm. Last year, Utah filed a lawsuit in an attempt to seize control of 18.5 million acres of "unappropriated" federal land—that is, land not already reserved for national parks, forests, or other designations. In a friend-of-the-court brief filed on behalf of the Wyoming state Legislature, a Mountain States attorney argued that national parks and monuments and other "appropriated" properties should also be included in any transfer. The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

Steve Bloch, legal director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, has skirmished with Mountain States in several public-land disputes—including, most recently, Utah's land-grab lawsuit. "From a litigating standpoint, I don't think of them as especially effective," Bloch says. "The position they stake out on behalf of their clients is pretty wildly out of touch with what the vast majority of Americans want to see on federal public lands in the American West."

Still, environmental groups say it's impossible to ignore the firm's political clout. In addition to Pendley, whose treatise for Project 2025 may have influenced recent Republican efforts

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Stephen Burg - Personal Injury: Plaintiff

Stephen Burg is a shareholder and a trial attorney with Burg Simpson Eldredge Hersh & Jardine. As the Practice Group Leader of the firm's Personal Injury Department, Stephen is focused on representing victims of automobile and motorcycle crashes, trucking collisions, product liability injuries, gas explosions, wrongful death, sexual assault and exploitation, and harmful drugs and medical products. One of Mr. Burg's recent trials resulted in a $18,105,000 verdict.*

A dedicated advocate for those who have been harmed by the carelessness of others, Stephen Burg has a long-standing reputation for his formidable skills as a litigator and a negotiator. He has a passion for holding negligent parties accountable for their actions and for maximizing financial recoveries for his clients.

Mr. Burg has been recognized for his legal excellence both nationally and locally. He was named as a "Recommended Attorney" by the U.S. Legal 500 and has been consistently recognized by the National Trial Lawyers as a "Top 100 Trial Lawyer" since 2012. He has also been selected by his peers as a Best Lawyer in America, a Colorado Super Lawyer, and a 5280 Top Lawyer.

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As a founding partner of Varner Faddis Elite Legal, Lauren has created a new kind of injury law firm that is dedicated to providing white-glove, luxury legal services and a brand that promotes authenticity and self-expression. VFEL is run by lawyers who aren't afraid to be themselves, say what they mean, and boldly challenge the disenfranchising narratives spun by insurance defense lobbyists to make conditions better for all personal injury cases to come.

Lauren has most notably received 5280's Top Lawyer designation three years in a row, has been named a SuperLawyers Rising Star annually since 2019, and was chosen as one of Law Week Colorado's Top Women in 2019. Lauren has dedicated her time as a board member of the Colorado Trial Lawyers Association, chair of the Women Trial Lawyers Network, and mentor to DU law students.

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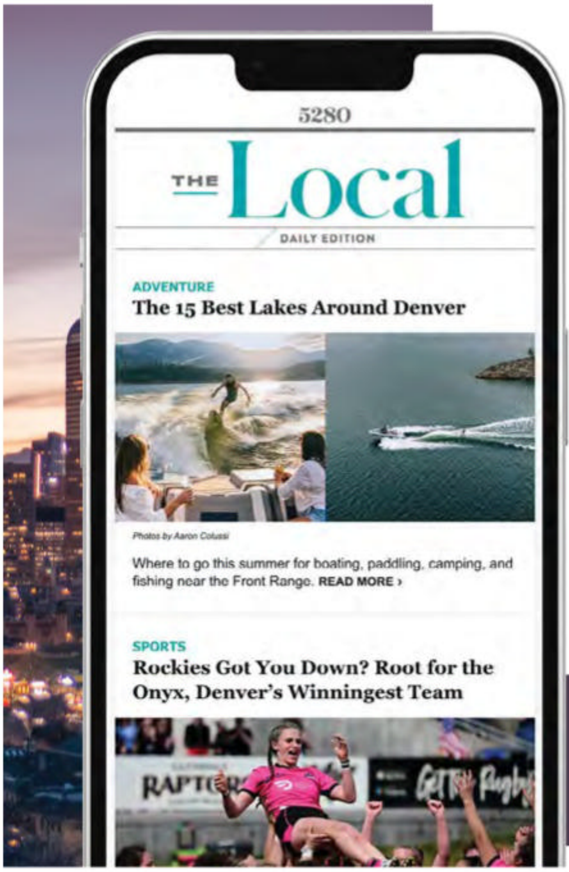

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Photos by Aaron Colussi

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Dining Guide

PRICE KEY
Average Entrée

$	under $15
$$	$16 to $20
$$$	$21 to $30
$$$$	$31 and higher

SYMBOL KEY

●
Indicates a restaurant featured in *5280* for the first time (though not necessarily a restaurant that has just opened).

★
Indicates inclusion in *5280*'s 2024 list of Denver's best restaurants. These selections are at the discretion of *5280* editors and are subject to change.

★ **A5 STEAKHOUSE** $$$$
LoDo / Steak House This rarified chophouse by the team behind Tap & Burger features a range of specialty steaks, eclectic sides with Asian influence, and draft cocktails. Never pass up the beef tartare katsu sando and the chickpea fries to start your meal. Reservations accepted. *1600 15th St., 303-623-0534. Dinner*

AFRICAN GRILL & BAR $$
Lakewood / African Explore Africa at this warm and inviting restaurant run by the Osei-Fordwuo family. Peanut soups, fried fish, samosas, and jollof rice are just some of the deeply flavorful options. Reservations accepted. *955 S. Kipling Parkway, Lakewood, 303-985-4497. Lunch, Dinner*

★ **ALMA FONDA FINA** $$$$
LoHi / Mexican This Michelin-starred contemporary Mexican restaurant wows with its creative, shareable plates, which often feature house-made masa and flavor-packed salsas. The camote asado (roasted sweet potato) is an excellent way to start your meal. Reservations accepted. *2556 15th St., 303-455-9463. Dinner*

ALTEÑO $$$$
Cherry Creek / Mexican This opulant destination from Michelin-starred chef Johnny Curiel of Alma Fonda Fina serves contemporary Mexican fare influenced by the chef's memories of the highlands of Jalisco. Seafood from the region's coastal waters and heartier dishes from higher elevations share menu space. Reservations accepted. *249 Clayton St., 303-532-4999. Dinner*

ANNETTE $$$
Aurora / American James Beard Award–winning chef Caroline Glover's Annette delivers a lineup of seasonal salads, pastas, wood-fired proteins, and other comforting bites in a modern, inviting space. Reservations accepted. *2501 Dallas St., Ste. 108, Aurora, 720-710-9975. Dinner*

★ **BAEKGA** $$$
Lowry Field / Korean Chef-owner Sean Baek serves flavorful Korean eats at this quaint Lowry Town Center spot. Don't miss out on the lunch specials, hearty portions of protein and rice that come with plenty of banchan (side dishes). Reservations not accepted. *200 Quebec St., Ste. 115, 720-639-3872. Lunch, Dinner*

BÁNH & BUTTER BAKERY CAFÉ $
Aurora / French Thoa Nguyen crafts French pastries inspired by her Vietnamese heritage at this East Colfax cafe. Go for the bánh mì and dazzling crepe cakes, each made with 25 to 30 layers. Reservations not accepted. *9935 E. Colfax Ave., Aurora, 720-513-9313. Breakfast, Lunch*

BAROLO GRILL $$$$
Cherry Creek / Italian Dedication to ingredients and tradition translates to the food and extensive wine menu at this elegant eatery, which is focused on the cuisines of northern Italy's Tuscany and Piedmont regions. Reservations accepted. *3030 E. Sixth Ave., 303-393-1040. Dinner*

BECKON $$$$
RiNo / Contemporary Chef Duncan Holmes brings an elevated, intimate dining experience to Larimer Street. The seasonal menu changes frequently, and excellent, thoughtful wine pairings are available. Reservations accepted. *2843 Larimer St., 303-749-0020. Dinner*

THE BINDERY $$$
LoHi / Contemporary Linda Hampsten Fox's eatery, market, and bakery offers worldly fare inspired by her travels. Settle in for the smoked rabbit pecan pie with mustard gelato. Reservations accepted. *1817 Central St., 303-993-2364. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, Brunch*

BLACK CAT FARMSTEAD $$$$
Longmont / American Chef Eric Skokan re-invented his Boulder-based Black Cat Bistro by moving the entire operation to a farm 12 miles north of town. Diners enjoy foothills views in private cabanas that seat up to 12. Dinner is a set, multicourse meal based on seasonally available vegetables, grains, legumes, and farm-raised meats. Reservations required. *9889 N. 51st St., Longmont, 303-444-5500. Dinner*

BRASSERIE BRIXTON $$$$
Cole / French Pair the likes of steak frites, pâté with house-baked sourdough, and other comforting French specialties with a glass of wine at this always-packed neighborhood bistro. But also be prepared for culinary creations that stray from the French canon. Reservations accepted. *3701 N. Williams St., 720-617-7911. Dinner*

BRUTØ $$$$
Downtown / International At the Wolf's Tailor's sister restaurant at the Dairy Block, executive chef Byron Gomez highlights heritage grains and house ferments in an omakase-style tasting menu. Tack on the cocktail pairing to make the experience even more special. Reservations accepted. *1801 Blake St., 720-325-2195. Dinner*

CAFE AION $$$
Boulder / Spanish This tucked-away bistro is styled after a European tapas bar. Enjoy a menu of small plates filled with local, seasonal ingredients. Try the season's latest house-cured chorizo or one of four paella preparations built for sharing. Reservations accepted. *1235 Pennsylvania Ave., Boulder, 303-993-8131. Lunch, Dinner, Brunch*

★ **CARNE** $$$$
RiNo / Steak House The newest restaurant from chef Dana Rodriguez, this "steak home" grills up exquisite cuts of beef at a range of price points. Also explore its internationally inspired menu of shared plates and composed entrées. Reservations accepted. *2601 Larimer St., 303-953-1558. Dinner*

CONVIVIO CAFÉ $
Berkeley / Cafe This bilingual cafe is named after the Guatemalan convivio, a get-together where all are welcome. Sip on spiced lattes and indulge in pastries and light lunch fare, like alfajores (dulce de leche cookies) and tostadas. Reservations not accepted. *4935 W. 38th Ave. Breakfast, Lunch*

COPERTA $$$
Uptown / Italian Tuck into comforting Italian fare at this restaurant, which celebrates the cuisine of Rome and southern Italy. Handmade pastas, creamy burrata, and fiery pollo alla diavola are among the top choices. Reservations accepted. *400 E. 20th Ave., 720-749-4666. Dinner*

CORRIDA $$$$
Boulder / Spanish Housed on the rooftop level of the Pearl West building, this elegant Spanish steak house offers stunning Flatiron views and fabulous cocktails and wines. The beef here is sourced from regenerative local farms. Reservations accepted. *1023 Walnut St., Ste. 400, Boulder, 303-444-1333. Dinner, Brunch*

★ **DÂN DÃ** $$
Aurora / Vietnamese Family recipes are on the menu at An and Thao Nguyen's cozy Vietnamese eatery dedicated to comfort food. Don't miss the dazzling spring roll towers and bubbling clay pots. Reservations accepted. *9945 E. Colfax Ave., Aurora, 720-476-7183. Lunch, Dinner*

DAUGHTER THAI KITCHEN & BAR $$$
LoHi / Thai This elegant, date-night-ready Thai restaurant from Ounjit Hardacre features favorites such as pad thai and massaman curry alongside a rotating lineup of rare-in-Denver specialties. Reservations accepted. *1700 Platte St., Ste. 140, 720-667-4652. Lunch, Dinner*

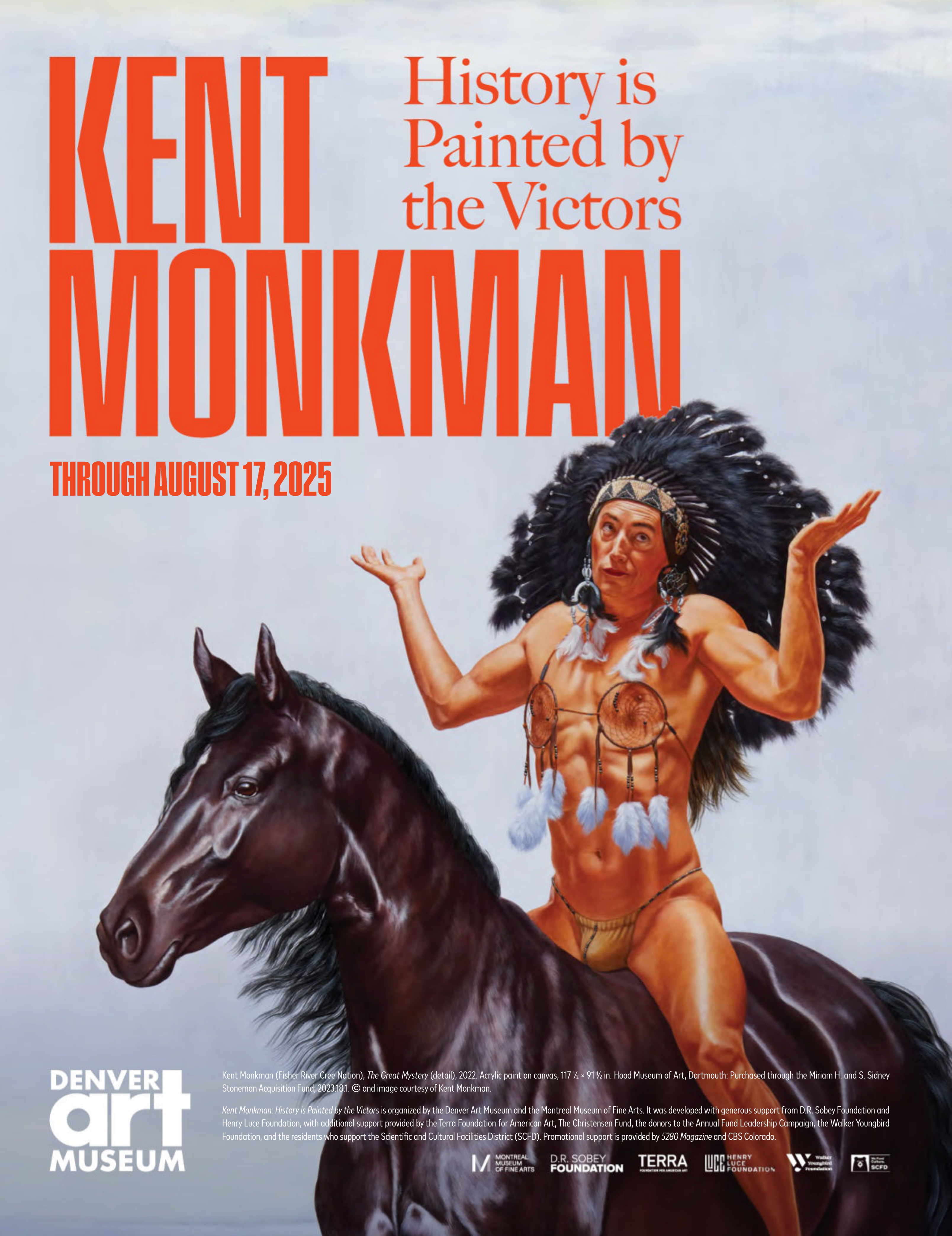
★ **DOUGH COUNTER** $$
University Hills / Pizza This fast-casual pizzeria specializes in Sicilian- and New York–style pies. For the former, we especially like the Triple Threat, striped with marinara, pesto, and vodka sauce. Reservations not accepted. *2466 S. Colorado Blvd., 303-997-8977. Lunch, Dinner*

WANT MORE DINING OPTIONS? Visit our online listings at 5280.com/restaurants.

KENT MONKMAN

History is Painted by the Victors

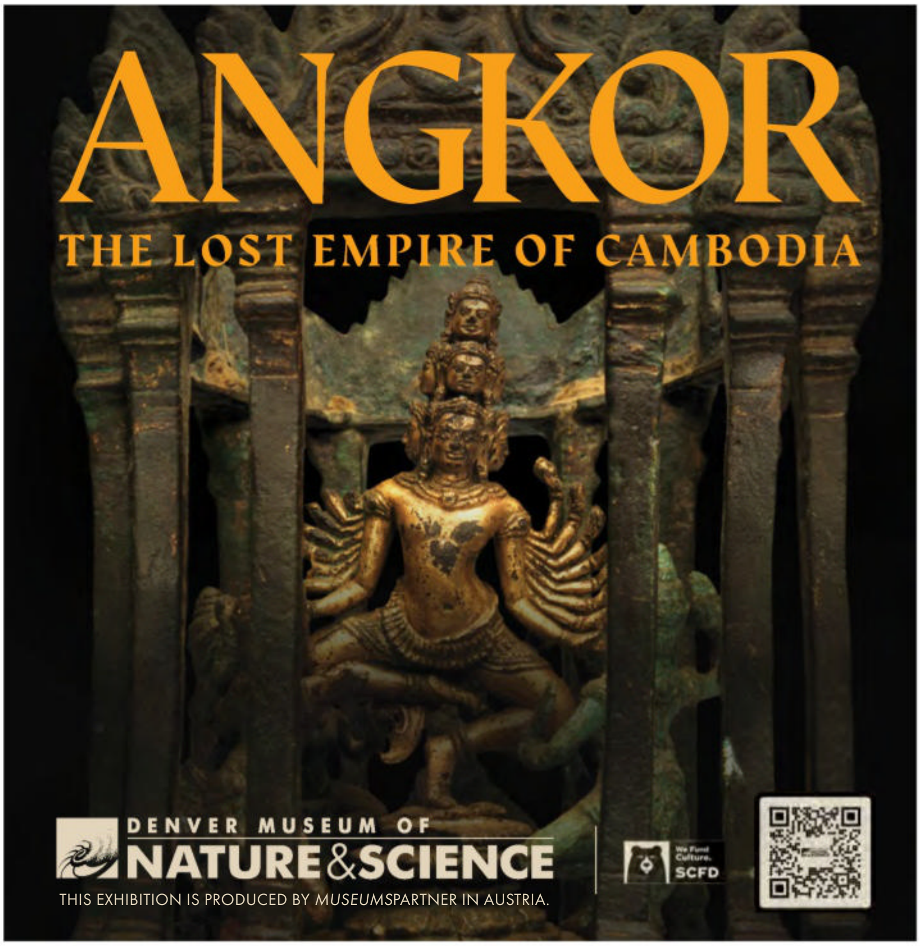
THROUGH AUGUST 17, 2025



DENVER art MUSEUM

Kent Monkman (Fisher River Cree Nation), *The Great Mystery* (detail), 2022. Acrylic paint on canvas, 117 ½ × 91 ½ in. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through the Miriam H. and S. Sidney Stoneman Acquisition Fund; 2023.18.1. © and image courtesy of Kent Monkman.

Kent Monkman: History is Painted by the Victors is organized by the Denver Art Museum and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. It was developed with generous support from D.R. Sobey Foundation and Henry Luce Foundation, with additional support provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art, The Christensen Fund, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign, the Walker Youngbird Foundation, and the residents who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). Promotional support is provided by *5280 Magazine* and CBS Colorado.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DRAGONFLY NOODLE $$
LoDo / Asian This eatery from restaurateur Edwin Zoe serves bao and noodle dishes from Vietnam, Japan, and other Asian locales. Order any of the slurp-worthy bowls of ramen with house-made noodles, or wade into a brimming bowl of pho. Also try the Boulder location. Reservations not accepted. *1350 16th St., 720-543-8000. Lunch, Dinner*

EL TACO DE MEXICO $
Lincoln Park / Mexican This Denver favorite and James Beard Foundation America's Classics winner has been serving Mexican food with an emphasis on traditional flavors since 1986. Try the chile relleno burrito. Reservations not accepted. *714 Santa Fe Drive, 303-623-3926. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

FAMOUS ORIGINAL J'S PIZZA $$
Five Points / Pizza Joshua Pollack's New York–style and rectangular grandma pies are totally customizable and available by the slice. Try the meat lovers with sausage, pepperoni, and diced Taylor ham. Reservations not accepted. *715 E. 26th Ave., 720-420-9102. Lunch, Dinner*

FISH N BEER $$$
RiNo / Seafood Kevin Morrison offers approachable, fresh seafood and a hearty beer list at this casual oysterette where nearly all of the food is cooked over a wood-burning grill. Try the ceviche or wood-fired whole bass. Reservations accepted. *3510 Larimer St., 303-248-3497. Dinner*

FOX AND THE HEN $$
LoHi / Breakfast This sunny brunch eatery brightens up any morning. The animal-style hash brown smothered in American cheese and special sauce (an homage to In-N-Out) is a must-order, but any of the elevated toasts or egg dishes are a smart way to start your day. Reservations accepted. *2257 W. 32nd Ave., 303-862-6795. Breakfast, Lunch, Brunch*

★ **FRASCA FOOD AND WINE** $$$$
Boulder / Italian The elegant fare at Michelin-starred Frasca, an ode to the cuisine of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy from master sommelier Bobby Stuckey and chef Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson, always wows. Splurge on executive chef Ian Palazzola's nine-course Friulano menu. Reservations accepted. *1738 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-442-6966. Dinner*

GAIA MASALA AND BURGER $$
Speer / Indian Go for divey chicken tikka masala cheesesteaks and smothered fries at this fast-casual Indian eatery, which serves up an excellent saag to boot. Late-night hours and a full bar are additional draws. Also try the Boulder and LoDo locations. Reservations not accepted. *609 Grant St., 720-779-0762. Lunch, Dinner*

THE GINGER PIG $$
Berkeley / Asian Chef-owner Natascha Hess serves Asian-inspired street food with playful twists at this casual spot that sports a Bib Gourmand rating from the *Michelin Guide*. The lamb stir-fry and the Hong Kong French toast are must-order dishes. Also try the takeout-only Boulder location. Reservations not accepted. *4262 Lowell Blvd., 720-324-8416. Dinner*

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GLADYS $

Edgewater / American Vegetable small plates are the draw at this seasonal, plant-based concept inside Edgewater Public Market. Don't miss the root-vegetable Reuben sandwich with dairy-free horseradish crème fraîche. Reservations not accepted. *5505 W. 20th Ave., Ste. 116, Edgewater, 303-276-3309. Lunch, Dinner*

GUARD AND GRACE $$$$

Downtown / Steak House Chef Troy Guard's modern steak house offers a chic setting for its elevated fare, from seafood towers to some of the best chocolate chip cookies in town. Try the flight of filet mignon, with Prime, wagyu, and grass-fed beef. Reservations accepted. *1801 California St., 303-293-8500. Lunch, Dinner*

GUSTO $$$

West Colfax / Italian From chef Lon Symensma of ChoLon fame, this Italian eatery abutting Sloan's Lake plates up a playful variety of antipasti, pastas, and pizza. Make sure to start with an order of focaccia. Reservations accepted. *671 Raleigh St., 303-284-0932. Lunch, Dinner*

HEY KIDDO $$$$

Berkeley / Contemporary From the team behind the Wolf's Tailor and Brutø, this globally inspired restaurant presents fine dining fare in relaxed environs. Try the wagyu beef galbi with chef's rice that's shaken tableside. Also check out the rooftop bar, OK Yeah. Reservations accepted. *4337 Tennyson St., Ste. 300, 720-778-2977. Dinner*

★**HOP ALLEY** $$$$

RiNo / Chinese From Tommy Lee of Uncle, this neighborhood hangout's daily menu is composed of dishes rooted in Chinese tradition with a distinctive flair. If spots are open at the luxurious chef's counter, though, don't miss the exclusive experience. Reservations accepted. *3500 Larimer St., 720-379-8340. Dinner*

●**ICHIGO MATCHA** $

LoDo / Japanese Quench your thirst at this street kiosk with matcha green tea, fruit smoothies, and popping boba drinks. Don't miss the taiyaki: fish-shaped waffles filled with strawberry or matcha soft-serve, Nutella, cheese, or red bean paste. Reservations not accepted. *1361 16th St., 720-799-6824. Lunch, Dinner*

IZAKAYA DEN $$$

Platt Park / Japanese This sibling to Sushi Den next door focuses on traditional small plates that pair well with Japanese beer, whisky, and sake. But the ultra-fresh nigiri and sashimi are worth a try too. Reservations accepted. *1487-A S. Pearl St., 303-777-0691. Lunch, Dinner*

JOVANINA'S BROKEN ITALIAN $$$

LoDo / Italian This gorgeous LoDo eatery expands on traditional Italian fare by incorporating unexpected, seasonal ingredients. Handmade pastas and wood-fired focaccia and pizzas provide an additional draw, as does a well-stocked amari cart. Reservations accepted. *1520 Blake St., 720-541-7721. Dinner*

KAWA NI $$$

LoHi / Asian Connecticut transplant Bill Taibe helms this upscale izakaya concept in LoHi. Peruse the eclectic menu of noodles, sushi, and small plates, and don't miss the shaved broccoli miso goma. Reservations accepted. *1900 W. 32nd Ave., 303-455-9208. Dinner*

★**KIKÉ'S RED TACOS** $

LoHi / Mexican This brick-and-mortar location of a popular Mexican food truck is known for its quesabirria tacos, which come stuffed with cheese and your choice of meat. Doctor up your order with the rainbow of sauces at the salsa bar. Reservations not accepted. *1200 W. 38th Ave., 720-397-0591. Lunch, Dinner*

LA DIABLA POZOLE Y MEZCAL $$

Ballpark / Mexican This lively eatery from chef Jose Avila earned a Michelin Bib Gourmand rating for its comforting pozole and other affordably priced Mexican fare. Don't miss the daily pastor selections served from the spinning trompo outside. Reservations not accepted. *2233 Larimer St., 720-519-1060. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, Brunch*

★**LA FORÊT** $$$$

Speer / French Transport yourself to an aspen grove at this bistro and bar. Head in during pastis hour to sample the anise-flavored aperitif with small plates, or dine on dishes like stag au poivre or rabbit vadouvan. Reservations not accepted. *38 S. Broadway, 303-351-7938. Dinner*

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LEEZAKAYA $$$$
Aurora / Japanese From the team behind Tofu Story and Mono Mono Korean Fried Chicken, this swanky eatery boasts an expansive menu of Japanese bites and sake. The mentaiko creamy pasta is a must-order. Reservations accepted. *2710 S. Havana St., Aurora, 720-769-6595. Lunch, Dinner*

LITTLE ARTHUR'S $$$
Capitol Hill / American Located inside Out of the Barrel Taproom, Little Arthur's uses high-quality ingredients to craft East Coast specialities such as margherita pizzas and cheesesteaks. Reservations not accepted. *205 E. Seventh Ave., Dinner*

LOU'S ITALIAN SPECIALTIES $$
Curtis Park / Italian This takeout-only spot by Joshua Pollack of Rosenberg's Bagels & Delicatessen takes after classic tri-state Italian delis. Try the Louie, packed with genoa salami, capicola, ham, and provolone cheese and drizzles of oil and vinegar. Reservations not accepted. *3357 N. Downing St., 720-287-3642. Lunch, Dinner*

LUCHADOR TACO & MORE $$
Whittier / Mexican Chef/owner Zuri Resendiz's vibrant takes on Mexican street food are refined and full of flavor. Don't miss the moles, octopus al pastor tacos, and the Peruvian-inspired plates, such as the lomo saltado or causa tartare. Reservations accepted. *2030 E. 28th Ave., 303-954-0672. Dinner*

★**LUCINA EATERY & BAR** $$$
South Park Hill / Latin American Bold flavors from Latin America, the Caribbean, and coastal Spain tantalize at this lively restaurant. Try the mofongo or the two-person paella served only on Fridays and Saturdays. Reservations accepted. *2245 Kearney St., Ste. 101, 720-814-1053. Dinner*

★**MAJOR TOM** $$$$
RiNo / American This lounge from the team behind Beckon offers a Champagne-centric drinks menu and a delectable lineup of shareable bites. Enjoy larger-format plates at a table inside, or throw back some oysters on the beautiful patio. Reservations accepted. *2845 Larimer St., 303-848-9777. Dinner, Brunch*

★**MAKFAM** $$
Baker / Chinese The Chinese cuisine, inspired by family recipes, at this fast-casual eatery blends tradition with a whole lot of fun. Try the jian bing (scallion pancake) sandwiches or Mama Wan's pork belly, with 24-hour braised pork served over rice. Reservations not accepted. *39 W. First Ave. Lunch, Dinner*

★**MARIGOLD** $$$$
Lyons / European This intimate, light-filled restaurant serves seasonally driven fare. The pink-peppercorn-laced farinata (chickpea pancake) is a delicious mainstay of the frequently changing menu; the amaro-centric cocktail program is also delightful. Reservations accepted. *405 Main St., Ste. B, Lyons, 303-823-2333. Dinner*

MERCANTILE $$$
LoDo / American Chef Alex Seidel offers upscale, contemporary farm-to-table fare, with a menu divided into earth, sea, grain, and pasture. Start with roasted vegetables before moving on to pastas and meaty entrées. Reservations accepted. *1701 Wynkoop St., Ste. 155, 720-460-3733. Lunch, Dinner*

★**MOLOTOV KITSCHEN & COCKTAILS** $$$$
City Park / Eastern European The ever-changing menu at this aptly kitschy restaurant celebrates the cuisine of Ukraine, with shoutouts to other Slavic traditions. Try house-baked breads, creative takes on borscht, and Eastern European dumplings. Reservations accepted. *3333 E. Colfax Ave., 303-316-3333. Dinner*

NA FAVOLA $$
Greenwood Village / Italian The Italian proprietors behind this neighborhood trattoria use simple, carefully sourced ingredients to create fresh pasta dishes and light, crisp Roman-style pizzas. Reservations accepted. *5909 S. University Blvd., Greenwood Village, 983-999-4139. Lunch, Dinner*

NI TUYO $$$
Belcaro / Mexican Visit this lively Bonnie Brae eatery for bubbly molcajetes, piping-hot stone bowls of Mexican meats and veggies stewed in salsa. Or grab a seat at the bar for a tasty margarita with an order of tortilla chips and guacamole. Reservations not accepted. *730 S. University Blvd., 303-282-8896. Dinner*

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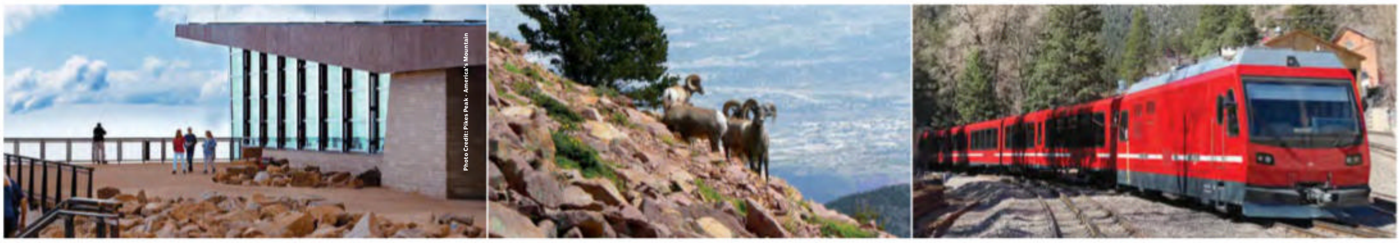

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OAK AT FOURTEENTH $$$$

Boulder / Seasonal This bright space just off the Pearl Street Mall offers a diverse, ever-changing menu of seasonal, oak-fired eats from chef Steve Redzikowski and creative cocktails from Bryan Dayton. Order the kale salad, roasted ocean trout, or a handmade pasta. Reservations accepted. *1400 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-444-3622. Dinner*

★ **ODIE B'S** $

Sunnyside / American Sandwiches reach their prime at this fast-casual joint. Try twists on classics like the fried chicken sandwich with deviled egg spread or the chopped cheese with breakfast sausage. Also try the Cole location. Reservations not accepted. *2651 W. 38th Ave., 303-993-8078. Breakfast, Lunch, Brunch*

OHANA ISLAND KITCHEN $

LoHi / Seafood Ohana means family, and you can be part of the family at this Hawaiian-inspired eatery serving top-notch tuna poke, Spam musubi, and more. Reservations not accepted. *2563 15th St., 303-718-6580. Lunch, Dinner*

OLIVE & FINCH $$

City Park West / American Discover wholesome, inspired meals at this restaurant, bakery, and juice bar, where you'll find espresso drinks, artisan sandwiches, hearty soups, tasty salads, and daily house-made pastries. Also try the Cherry Creek or Union Station locations. Reservations not accepted. *1552 E. 17th Ave., 303-832-8663. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

OSTERIA ALBERICO $$

Englewood / Italian The latest from the Frasca Hospitality Group serves up osteria-style Italian cuisine: rustic, straightforward, and comforting, but with the same attention to wine, hospitality, and seasonality we've come to expect from Tavernetta, Sunday Vinyl, and Frasca Food and Wine. Reservations accepted. *3455 S. University Blvd., Engelwood, 303-970-8840. Dinner*

★ **OTOTO** $$$

Platt Park / Japanese From the team behind Sushi Den and Izakaya Den, this sleek eatery breaks away from its Den Corner counterparts by focusing on more casual Japanese eats. Try the yellowtail collar and other meat and seafood specialties grilled over white oak charcoal. Reservations accepted. *1501 S. Pearl St., 303-942-1416. Dinner, Brunch*

PADOCA BAKERY & MARKET $

Montclair / Brazilian This Brazilian bakery serves an assortment of sweet and savory goodies. Try traditional items, like the brigadeiro or the pão de queijo, with a latte, or ask about lunchtime burger and sandwich specials. Reservations not accepted. *950A Jersey St., 720-520-0074. Breakfast, Lunch*

PETE'S KITCHEN $

Cheesman Park / American A Denver staple for late-night food, Pete's is known for its breakfasts but serves burgers, gyros, and souvlaki sandwiches all day. Reservations not accepted. *1962 E. Colfax Ave., 303-321-3139. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

PIZZERIA LUI $$

Lakewood / Pizza Seasonal pies come out of the oven with just the right char. Try the street taco pizza, which is topped with house-made chorizo, corn, cotija cheese, tomatillo salsa, mozarella, and cilantro. Reservations not accepted. *5380 W. Mississippi Ave., Lakewood, 303-922-3202. Dinner*

THE PLIMOTH $$$$

Skyland / American An emphasis on locally farmed and foraged ingredients results in an ever-changing menu of seasonal dishes, like cauliflower paprikash and Ollin Farms tatsoi salad. Reservations accepted. *2335 E. 28th Ave., 303-297-1215. Dinner*

★ **POINT EASY** $$$$

Whittier / Contemporary This stylish farm-to-table eatery produces feasts with thoughtfully sourced ingredients, many of which are grown locally. Pair the mushroom risotto or seasonal crudo with a specialty cocktail or wine recommendation from the knowledgeable staff. Reservations accepted. *2000 E. 28th Ave., 303-233-5656. Dinner*

PONY UP $$

LoDo / Pub This casual bar serves comforting fare well into late-night hours. French dip sandwiches in several tempting styles are the focus of the menu (we crush the Saigon and the Chicago), along with fried chicken, craft cocktails, and lots of bubbly. Reservations not accepted. *1808 Blake St., 720-710-8144. Dinner*

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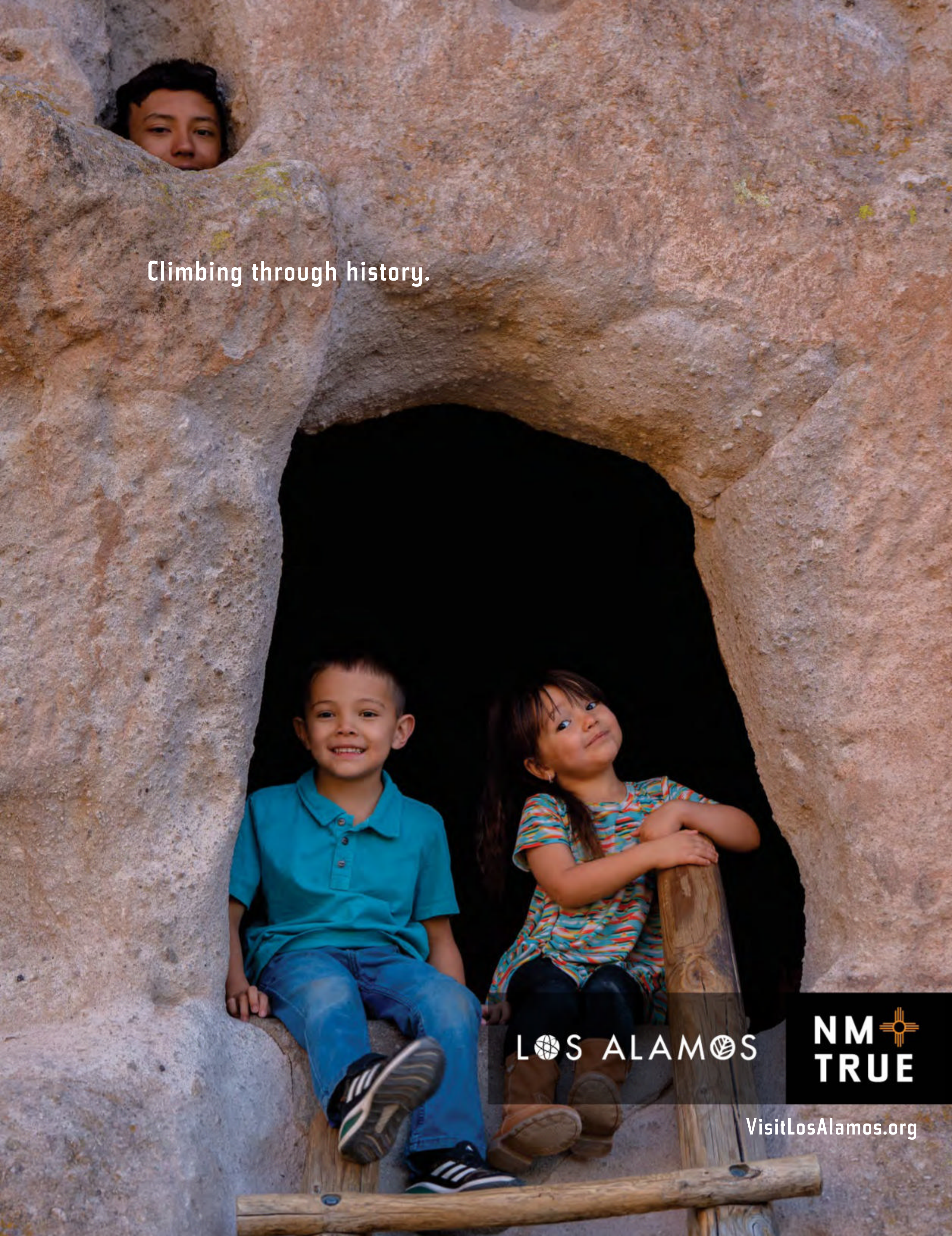
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THE PORCHETTA HOUSE $

City Park West / Italian The porchetta at this lunch-to-late-night eatery is an expression of both Italian tradition and globally minded creativity. Try the al pastor sandwich loaded with caramelized pineapple pico and cotija cheese or the porchetta bánh mì. Reservations not accepted. *1510 Humboldt St., 303-861-7333. Lunch, Dinner*

PROTO'S PIZZERIA NAPOLETANA $$

LoHi / Pizza Enjoy wood-fired Italian-style pizza, fresh salads, and a nice wine list at this local chain, then step into the pizzeria's not-so-secret Nearby Bar. Also try the Broomfield location. Reservations accepted. *2401 15th St., 720-855-9400. Lunch, Dinner*

ROS SIAM $$

Jefferson Park / Thai This restaurant sits inside an inviting, repurposed Jefferson Park house (complete with a front porch) and serves up exciting Thai dishes like drunken noodles and pumpkin curry. Reservations accepted. *2637 W. 26th Ave., 303-953-0291. Lunch, Dinner*

★**SAP SUA** $$$

Congress Park / Vietnamese This smart eatery from chef-owners Ni and Anna Nguyen finds its culinary footing in Vietnamese flavors. Herbaceous offerings like culantro-capped tomato toast and lemongrass pork shoulder are favorites of the menu. Reservations accepted. *2550 E. Colfax Ave., 303-736-2303. Dinner*

SAWA $$

University / International African, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern dishes mingle together in this Sudanese-owned restaurant's buffet line. Less hungry patrons can also order from the à la carte menu. Reservations not accepted. *1737 E. Evans Ave., 720-505-8937. Lunch, Dinner*

★**SPUNTINO** $$$

Highland / Italian Enjoy the locally sourced menu at this Italian-inspired, husband-and-wife-owned spot. Go for any of the dishes with South Indian influences—informed by chef Cindhura Reddy's heritage—like cavatelli with chicken korma. House-made gelatos in unique flavors are also a must. Reservations accepted. *2639 W. 32nd Ave., 303-433-0949. Dinner*

★**SUNDAY VINYL** $$$

LoDo / European This Union Station wine bar offers warm hospitality, exquisite cuisine, and an extensive bottle list, all to the beat of a vinyl-only playlist. Order the caviar-topped hash brown patty. Reservations accepted. *1803 16th St., 720-738-1803. Dinner*

SUSHI BY SCRATCH $$$$

LoDo / Japanese Chefs Phillip Frankland Lee and Margarita Kallas-Lee bring their entertaining omakase experience to a subterranean space in Larimer Square. Expect nearly 20 courses of sushi and other creative bites, plus sake and Japanese whisky flights. Reservations accepted. *1441 Larimer St., 720-724-7729. Dinner*

SWITCHBACK SMOKEHOUSE $$

Kittredge / Barbecue Dig into fruitwood-smoked meats like Montreal-style brisket and duck breast at this mountain-town barbecue joint with a shaded patio overlooking Bear Creek. Don't miss the Devil's Elbow sandwich. Reservations not accepted. *26220 CO 74, Kittredge, 303-200-0878. Lunch, Dinner*

TABLE 6 $$$

Speer / American This space's warm and cozy atmosphere extends to chef Aniedra Nichols' American bistro cuisine, which is elevated by haute foodie touches. Don't miss the house-made tots with ever-changing accoutrements—a long-standing Table 6 tradition. Reservations accepted. *609 Corona St., 303-831-8800. Dinner*

TEMAKI DEN $$

RiNo / Japanese Chef Kenta Kamo and Sushi Den's Toshi Kizaki team up to bring delectable temaki, aburi nigiri, and craft beverages to this restaurant inside the Source. Sushi counter seating is the best spot for watching the action. Reservations accepted. *3330 Brighton Blvd., Ste. 110, 225-405-0811. Dinner*

TESSA DELICATESSEN $

Montclair / Deli This modern, all-day eatery from Vince Howard, formerly of Del Rey Deli in Los Angeles, serves hot and cold sandwiches and classic salads to the Montclair neighborhood. Reservations not accepted. *5724 E. Colfax Ave., 720-746-9138. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

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Daily Happenings

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Monday	Start the week strong with a workout class at one of over 4 boutique studios. Break for lunch with a fresh salad, sandwich, or smoothie bowl just down the street.
Tuesday	Treat yourself to a morning coffee and pastry or get a mani-pedi to break up the week. End the day with Live Music at the Beer Garden from 5 - 7PM.
Wednesday	It's Belleview Station Happy Hour at over 10 restaurants mid-week. Check the calendar for hours, specials, and find Bingo and Jeopardy nights going on!
Thursday	Team Trivia Night is on after work at 7PM at the Beer Garden. Meet up with friends or make dining reservations to elevate your week.
Friday	Find Live Music at 3 separate spots this evening depending on the vibe you want! Check the calendar and head to a happy hour after the work week.
Saturday	Head to a rooftop bar with a live DJ from 8PM - 12AM. Liven up the weekend with mountain views and fancy cocktails.
Sunday	People + Produce Farmers Market Sundays from 9AM - 1PM. Outdoor Fitness Classes on the Beer Garden Patio 10 - 11AM Sundays before mimosas.

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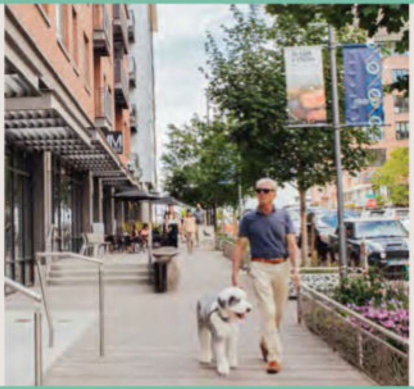

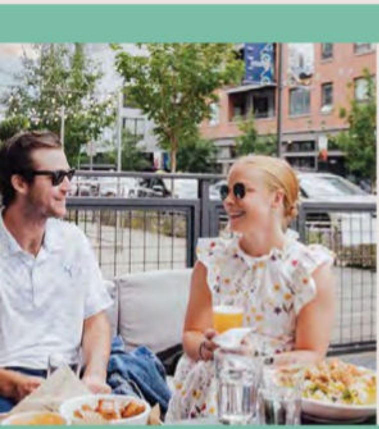

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The district is one block west of I-25 off Belleview Avenue and is adjacent to the Belleview Station light rail stop.

TOCABE, AN AMERICAN INDIAN EATERY $

Berkeley / American Feast on Indigenous fare such as fry bread tacos made with ingredients sourced from Native producers at this fast-casual spot. The company also has an online marketplace for Native-produced bison and pantry goods and donates prepared meals to tribal communities in need. Reservations not accepted. *3536 W. 44th Ave., 720-524-8282. Lunch, Dinner*

★ **TRAVELING MERCIES** $$$

Aurora / Seafood Annette's Caroline Glover expands her offerings at the Stanley Marketplace with this petite oyster and cocktail bar on the third floor. Beyond bivalves, try the anchovy and baguette with French churned butter and the house martini, garnished with a mini meal of its own. Reservations accepted. *2501 Dallas St., Ste. 311, Aurora. Dinner*

ULTREIA $$$

LoDo / Spanish Indulge in Iberian fare at this Union Station fixture from chef Adam Branz. Stop in for pintxos at happy hour and stay for more tapas and large plates. Can't decide? Opt for the Chef's Feast, at $90 for two people. Reservations accepted. *1701 Wynkoop St., Ste. 125, 303-534-1970. Lunch, Dinner, Brunch*

VINH XUONG BAKERY $

Athmar Park / Vietnamese This family-owned bakery has roots in Denver that stretch back more than 25 years. The coffehouse-style counter serves up delicious bánh mì sandwiches on house-made baguettes, plus other tasty Vietnamese treats. We recommend a bánh cam (sesame ball) for dessert. Reservations not accepted. *2370 Alameda Ave., 303-922-0999. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

VITAL ROOT $$

Berkeley / American Justin Cucci's veg-forward eatery focuses on quick, healthy food. Grab a seat in the airy space and nosh on creative, wholesome fare such as cashew-queso dip or sunflower risotto. There's even bacon made with umaro seaweed. Reservations not accepted. *3915 Tennyson St., 303-474-4131. Lunch, Dinner, Brunch*

★ **THE WOLF'S TAILOR** $$$$

Sunnyside / Contemporary This Michelin-starred (plus a green star for sustainability) restaurant from chef-restaurateur Kelly Whitaker transforms local ingredients into a globally minded, prix fixe tasting menu. Don't get too full before hitting executive pastry chef Emily Thompson's dessert course. Reservations accepted. *4058 Tejon St., 720-456-6705. Dinner*

WORK & CLASS $$$

RiNo / American This elevated meat-and-three concept from chef Dana Rodriguez offers a delicious hybrid of American and Latin cuisine in raucous, repurposed-shipping-container digs. Our picks: the rotisserie chicken, chickpea croquettes, and the roasted Colorado lamb. Reservations not accepted. *2500 Larimer St., 303-292-0700. Dinner*

XIQUITA $$$

Uptown / Mexican Chef Erasmo Casiano (also of Lucina) serves soulful fare inspired by the cuisine of Mexico City. Don't miss the nixtamal masa dishes—tacos, of course, but also tamales, sopes, and molotes—and witty takes on classic cocktails. Reservations accepted. *500 E. 19th Ave., 720-287-2701. Dinner*

YACHT CLUB $

Cole / American Enjoy classic and creative cocktails built with house-made ingredients alongside an array of snacks (yes, hot dogs are hot here) at this James Beard Award–nominated bar and lounge from natural wine expert Mary Allison Wright and bar pro McLain Hedges. Reservations not accepted. *3701 N. Williams St., 720-443-1135. Dinner*

★ **YUAN WONTON** $$

North Park Hill / Asian House-made dumplings earn top billing at this ambitious eatery from James Beard Award–nominated chef Penelope Wong, who also creates unique Cantonese-American dishes. Head in on Fridays for a dim-sum-themed lunch that showcases the best of Wong's hand-folded delicacies. Reservations accepted. *2878 Fairfax St., 303-320-5642. Lunch*

▶ These listings are in no way related to advertising in *5280*. If you find that a restaurant differs significantly from the information in its listing or your favorite restaurant is missing from the Dining Guide, please let us know. Write us at 5280 Elevated, Inc., 1675 Larimer St., Suite 675, Denver, CO 80202 or dining@5280.com.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 71

to sell public lands or prioritize their use for extraction industries, they point to Karen Budd-Falen, a former Mountain States attorney who is now second in command at Trump's Interior Department.

"The concern right now is that so many of these folks who have come up [through] Mountain States are once again in positions of power," says Aaron Weiss, deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities, a Denver-based conservation group. "It would be a mistake to underestimate them. They are one of these groups that's a bridge between mainstream Washington conservatism and this far right, anti-public-lands, Sagebrush Rebellion conservatism."

WILLIAM TRACHMAN'S last day working for the federal government was January 20, 2021. Having submitted his resignation letter, he cleaned out his desk at the U.S. Department of Education's regional office in Denver and left the César E. Chávez Memorial Building 10 minutes before the inauguration ceremony for President Joe Biden; someone had already removed the office photos of Donald Trump and Mike Pence. Eight days later, Trachman started his new job at the Mountain States Legal Foundation.

Growing up in Fresno, California, during the Ronald Reagan administration, Trachman remembers being fascinated by politics and the hoopla around presidential elections. His father was an admirer of the libertarian author Ayn Rand; his mother was "very left wing," he says. He considered himself a libertarian in high school, but his politics shifted after the September 11 attacks: "I decided that the world was a rough-and-tumble place, and we needed to set aside our bleeding hearts and get tough." He majored in political science as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, took his law degree there, clerked for a George W. Bush appointee at the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver, worked for a large firm in San Francisco, married another attorney, and then moved to Colorado.

After working as a defense attorney in employment cases, Trachman became the general counsel to the Douglas County School District, which was embroiled in a series of legal battles involving vouchers, open records, union disputes, and more. ("I was the

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beneficiary of a lot of that drama," Trachman says dryly.) In 2017, after the district's solidly conservative school board lost several seats to a more liberal contingent, Trachman moved to Washington as a Trump appointee. He spent two years there as a deputy assistant secretary in the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, rescinding Obama-era initiatives, before moving back to Denver to work at the regional office and then at Mountain States.

His background in education and employment made Trachman an ideal fit with the organization, given its long history of opposing DEI efforts. Since he's been there, the group has expanded its activities in the equal protection arena, obtaining injunctions that put the brakes on three Biden administration programs. Two of them involved disaster and pandemic relief for farmers and ranchers that, Mountain States argued, favored certain applicants based on race or sex. The third proposed regulations that would have expanded school protections for transgender students and the use of preferred pronouns. The change in leadership in Washington this year may have doomed the programs anyway, but Trachman is wary of declaring victory too soon. "Executive orders don't entrench a ruling like a court precedent would," he says. "That's why our suits have to continue."

Perhaps the most emphatic demonstration of the firm's dogged persistence is its nearly decade-long battle with the FAA. The lawsuit's origins date back to Obama administration efforts to boost the hiring of people of color and other underrepresented groups at the FAA, one of the least diverse agencies in the executive branch. The lawsuit contends that changes to the FAA's hiring process, introduced in 2013, created a "race-skewed screening mechanism" that favored certain applicants—by, for example, awarding extra points for having low high school grades in science or being unemployed for five or more months in the past three years—at the expense of more qualified candidates.

More than 900 of the passed-over applicants are now plaintiffs in the Mountain States lawsuit. A Republican-majority Congress passed legislation in 2016 banning the FAA's use of the biographical assessment. But the agency's critics contend the Biden administration continued to promote diversity over merit and that the cascading effects of air traffic controller shortages and stress have created an ongoing crisis in the air. The day after the helicopter-jet collision, Mountain States published a blog post calling the accident "a sobering reminder of the cost of placing ideology over expertise."

Biden's secretary of transportation, Pete Buttigieg, has defended the former administration's management of the FAA and called efforts to blame the crash on DEI initiatives "despicable." Leaders of both parties have sounded alarms about short-staffing at the agency for years; some contend the problem dates to Reagan's firing of 11,345 striking air traffic controllers in 1981. The FAA claims to have slightly exceeded its 2024 hiring goal of 1,800 new controllers, but its own data indicates that nearly half of its facilities remain understaffed—and that thousands of additional controllers are needed to bring the towers up to full strength.

The Trump administration has already issued orders banning DEI programs, and Sean Duffy, the current secretary of transportation, has stressed a need for "the best and the brightest" in the control tower. "I have a deep debt of gratitude to President Trump for spotlighting things like illegal DEI that

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have been a scourge on the country for four years," Trachman says. "Highlighting that issue—not just in the sense that it's morally wrong, but also that it's dangerous to put people in positions with a high level of trust based on race or sex—that is something I will forever be grateful for."

The new regime's embrace of a cause that Mountain States has been litigating for years raises intriguing questions about the firm's future. Will hardcore conservatives continue to support the organization's efforts to limit the scope of government when the head of the executive branch seems unabashedly bent on tearing apart the entire apparatus from within? Do the corporate tycoons and billionaires who serve in Trump's Cabinet really need a small Colorado firm out there crusading for a free marketplace? In short, are Mountain States and its contingent of attorneys still relevant now that their previously fringe causes have become mainstream? Former Mountain States chief Pendley concedes the return of Trump "may make it more difficult from a fundraising standpoint."

Far from packing it in, the firm seems busier than ever these days. It continues to pursue a spate of its trademark little-guy-versus-big-government cases, including the plight of a Colorado Springs teen who was sent home from his middle school for wearing a Gadsen flag ("Don't Tread on Me") patch on his backpack, along with images of Pac-Man-type ghosts toting "ghost guns." It's Mountain States' contention that its client's First Amendment rights were trod upon.

In recent years, the firm has also beefed up its Second Amendment litigation, creating a special practice group (the Center to Keep and Bear Arms) "dedicated to helping you fight for your natural right to self-defense—from both man and tyranny." The group challenged the government's right to regulate guns built at home from kits, taking the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, only to be rebuffed by a 7-2 decision in March in favor of the feds. Another case, seeking to throw out a 2023 law requiring a three-day waiting period to purchase firearms in Colorado, is still pending.

Trachman says the foundation is also considering the launch of a Center for Energy Freedom, which would seek to "fulfill the vision of unleashing American energy production." Battles over energy policy have been at the heart of the group's agenda from the beginning, but Trachman thinks the next four years will be a critical phase of the struggle, as the Trump administration tries to impose its drill-baby-drill fever dream and states attempt to push back with their own regulatory schemes.

This year, Mountain States and Trump's Department of Justice filed separate lawsuits attacking New York's plan to create a "climate superfund" that would make energy companies pay for infrastructure projects that help the state adapt to climate change. The case is an indication that, whether in John Lobb wing tips or Manolo Blahniks or hand-tooled cowboy boots, the suits from Mountain States expect to be in court and in the fray, offering aid and comfort and expertise to the fossil-fuel crowd, much as they did for the Sagebrush rebels of yesteryear. "Don't call it a comeback," Trachman says. "We never left."

Alan Prendergast is a Denver-based writer and the author of *Gangbuster: One Man's Battle Against Crime, Corruption, and the Klan*. Send feedback to letters@5280.com.

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5280 SCENE CALENDAR

PROMOTIONS | EVENTS | SPONSORSHIPS

JUL 7

Alsop Conducts Shostakovich The Philadelphia Orchestra

Vail, Colorado | 6:00 p.m..

A stunning evening awaits as pipa virtuoso Wu Man joins The Philadelphia Orchestra for Zhao Jiping's cinematic Pipa Concerto No. 2. Conductor Marin Alsop also leads Beethoven's triumphant Leonore Overture and Shostakovich's defiant Fifth Symphony.

Information and tickets at bravovail.org/performances.

JUL 7-12

Ranch Week

Anderson Ranch Arts Center
5263 Owl Creek Road, Snowmass Village, CO 81623

Join Anderson Ranch Arts Center in the annual celebration of the arts with Ranch Week. Highlights include the Ranch Gala on July 10th, honoring acclaimed artist Titus Kaphar. Ranch Week features many free public events, including a movie screening, an artist lecture, and concludes with a community picnic and silent auction on July 12th.

Information and tickets at andersonranch.org/ranch-week-2025.

JUL 13-20

Crested Butte Wine + Food Festival

Crested Butte, CO

Savor the ultimate mountain getaway at the Crested Butte Wine + Food Festival, July 13–20, 2025. Indulge in world-class wines, gourmet cuisine, and unforgettable events—all in the Wildflower Capital of Colorado.

Information and tickets at cbwineandfood.org.

CHERRY CREEK NORTH
JUL 17

5280 Top of the Town

Cherry Creek North Fillmore Plaza | 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS! WE'RE EXCITED to be back at Cherry Creek North to celebrate the best stuff in and around Denver. Don't miss out on this all inclusive event filled with tasty bites, buzzy sips, live entertainment and so much more.

Information and tickets at 5280scene.com.

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JUL
19-20

2025 Courage Classic Bicycle Tour

Copper Mountain Resort

Experience a breathtaking ride through the Rocky Mountains in support of lifesaving care for kids at Children's Hospital Colorado. Choose from multiple supported routes, including a family-friendly 2-mile loop. Register to ride or volunteer today!

More information at supportchildrenscolorado.org/courage-classic.

JUL
31

Telluride's Unrivaled Food & Wine Festival

Telluride Colorado | July 31 - August 2

Telluride Reserve is an intimate celebration of food and wine—featuring the likes of Michelin-starred Chef Johnny Curiel and James Beard Award winner Chef Matt Vawter, and exceptional wines from generational Caymus Vineyards and estate-grown Mending Wall Winery among others.

Information and tickets at telluridereserve.com.

AUG
7

Motorized Madness Media Challenge

Children's Hospital Colorado | 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

The Motorized Madness Media Challenge is a fun-filled morning of exhilarating remote control car racing where everyone is racing for smiles, and ultimately, the end to pediatric cancer. Each team is made up of a pediatric cancer patient, a local media or sports personality, a local race car driver, and one of MAF's amazing community sponsors. Motorized Madness is open to the public and FREE to attend! Bring your family and friends for an unforgettable morning!

For more information, visit morganadamsfoundation.org/all-events.

SEP
24

Colorado Children's Campaign 40th Anniversary Celebration

Hangar Club Denver | 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

The Colorado Children's Campaign has been truly fortunate to have wonderful support from the community since its inception in 1985. This year's event will bigger and better than ever to celebrate the 40 years of impact The Campaign has made throughout its history.

Information and tickets at bit.ly/3EOONjj.

THE OVERSIMPLIFIED GUIDE TO:

Finding Dispersed Campsites

Scoring a reservation at a national or state park in the summer is harder than snagging a seat at Casa Bonita. But there are plenty of free first-come, first-served slices of backcountry available during the busy season, says Heather Balogh Rochfort, the Carbondale-based author of *Sleeping Bags to S'mores: Camping Basics*—if you know where to look. —JESSICA GILES

1

You should scout for campsites whenever you drive through the mountains or desert. When you stumble across a good spot (usually along OHV roads in U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management land), **drop a pin on your phone so you can find it again.**

2

We know you love Crested Butte's wildflowers and Telluride's box canyon—but so does everyone else. **Try exploring towns *next* to popular ones.** For example, instead of searching for a site in Steamboat Springs, set up camp near Kremmling, where you can soak up the silence.

3

Once you've picked a general locale, **search the area on Google Maps** and review the topography and satellite imagery. Look for flat, open clearings with a little bit of shade. "No one wants to drive two hours down a dirt road just to be foiled," Balogh Rochfort says.

4

Did you discover a beautiful, untouched meadow beside a waterfall? Don't steamroll it with your car and pitch your tent like a conquistador's flag. Make sure it's legal to camp there and **stick to pre-established dispersed sites,** usually indicated by a worn dirt "driveway" and a rock fire ring.

5

You won't find Colorado's most secluded campsites using internet searches. If the spot is written about online, you're probably not going to have it all to yourself. The best way to find a hidden gem? **"You have to be willing to explore,"** Balogh Rochfort says.

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMONE MASSONI

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